

District Chronicles

Future stars shine at THEARC's programs

Erica Morrison/Contributing Writer

Issue date: 2/4/08 Section: Cover

Melodies of Sir William Walton's Crown Imperial and Edward "Duke" Ellington's "Take The 'A' Train" streamed from the only theater East of the Anacostia River on a recent Saturday afternoon as the National Symphony Orchestra played a free concert for the community at The Town Hall Education Arts & Recreation Campus, THEARC.



Media Credit: Erica Morrison/Staff Writer

"It was a great program," declared Nick DeCarlo, looking at his 4-year-old son tugging at his arm. "I hope to get him involved in music, maybe when he gets a little older."

The DeCarlos are from Arlington, Virginia, but that is precisely what THEARC management wants -- to make this arts and cultural center a destination for D.C. metro residents -- just like Kennedy Center, but with a twist.

Unlike The Kennedy Center, THEARC houses multiple programs, including a middle school for girls, a college degree program, the Washington Ballet and the Levine School of Music.

On this particular Saturday, the 365-seat theater was packed with symphony orchestra music lovers to enjoy a trip "Around the World at the Speed of Sound." Conductor, Emil de Cou led an audience of face painted, instrument case toting, music enthusiasts on an hour-long journey from the United States, to Germany, Africa, and back home with a few other stops in between.

The journey captivated the audience, despite the occasional explosion of a balloon animal and crying babies. Digital images of students from the Corcoran ArtReach Programs masterpieces danced across the screen to the rhythms of George Bizet's "Farandole from Suite No. 2" from "L'Arlésienne." Dancers of the Washington Ballet at THEARC dressed as clowns leaped across the stage to Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky's "Mother Ginger's Dance" from the "Nutcracker." Cello soloist Desmond Neysmith also performed and encouraged parents to get their children involved in the arts early.

Following the performance, the ballerinas and musicians filed upstairs to the Washington Ballet at THEARC and Levine School of Music at THEARC, for their Saturday afternoon lessons. There, three beginner violinists as young as 4 were plucking at the strings of their miniature violins, tuning them for class. Parents looked on in satisfaction as instructor Mary Findley adjusted their strings to perfection.

Once they were all tuned up and ready to go, they turned towards Mrs. Findley with their violins tucked under their right arm, bowed straight down and said in unison, "I'm ready to learn Mrs. Findley!" Thus began that Saturday's lesson.

One student, six-year-old Lauren Brown, has been playing the violin since she was 3. She is not sure she likes the violin, but with a shrug, she said: "It's ok!" Her mother Marcia laughed. "I want her to be proficient in any instrument. She wanted to play the violin," she said.

Lauren does not have dreams of becoming a concert violinist like Mrs. Findley who performs in solo and chamber music concerts, but that doesn't matter. "That is not the goal," Mrs. Findley said. "I want them to learn to love music. Playing an instrument gives them a better sense of concentration."

Five-year-old Amber Whetstone is also in the class. Peeking from around the corner of her mother's chair, Amber listed the songs she knows how to play in a soft voice: "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, and Huckleberry Huckleberry."

Ann Whetstone, Amber's mother, nodded and chimed in, "It helps them do better in school." The music fever has swept through the Whetstone house. Whetstone's 3-year-old is also a student at Levine. "I want my children to be exposed to something that I never was, musically," Whetstone said.

Anacostia resident LaMonica Cousar shares these same values. Cousar has six children enrolled in the Levine School of Music at THEARC, two violinists Damari, 4 and Dara, 11, two saxophonists Donao, 9 and Darrell, 13, a pianist Keiven, 15, and 1-year-old Dylan who is in the Early Childhood Music program.

Dara, 11 is a Jack Kent Cook Scholar and saves \$70 a month on lessons. "I only have to rent the violins; all the other instruments are provided," Cousar said. THEARC gives children such as these an opportunity most children could only imagine.