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Graduate Students Lead Diverse Children's Orchestra to New Heights

Ioana Patringsenaru | May 31, 2011

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A diverse group of a dozen elementary and middle school students was sitting quietly on the stage of the Conrad Prebys Music Center at UC San Diego. They were playing homemade shakers, one-chord instruments and other unusual musical contraptions. The music, sometimes improvised, soared through the concert hall and toward an audience mostly made up of the children's mothers. All listened attentively. Some took pictures with their cell phones. One mom had brought a video camera.



Drew Allen, a doctoral student in composition, directs students during a performance at the Conrad Prebys Concert Hall.

Photos/Erik Jepsen

The families had come all the way from Spring Valley to listen to their children perform under the direction of three UCSD graduate students. They are part of the Universal Language Orchestra, an outreach program run by the university's department of music and the Spring Valley Community Center.

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The program started in October 2010 and recently concluded its second quarter, with more than 20 children involved. UCSD graduate students recently received a \$12,500 grant from the University of California Institute for Research in the Arts to help expand the program, said Adam Tinkle, one of the key organizers. The funds will go toward kits that students could take home to build their own instruments; transportation to different venues—perhaps even a tour for some of the more advanced students; and stipends for UCSD students.

"There's such a hunger for creativity and for these kids to have an outlet for their creativity," said Tinkle.



Antonneo and Antonneal Marshall at the percussions.

The goal of Universal Language Orchestra is to help the children develop their creativity and learn about experimental music. But music professor Charles Curtis, who oversees the program, said he also hopes the children and their parents will take away a positive image of UCSD. They live in a community that may perceive the campus as remote—and that's just not true, Curtis said.

"We're here, we're welcoming, we're interested," he said. "That's a powerful message for children this age."

It seems to be working. All children interviewed for this story said they wanted to go to college. All also said they were having a great time in the program. "It's fun," said Curtis Steven, 12. "We don't get bored." Curtis is in the band at his school, but he said he likes the UCSD program because it allows him to improvise.

For Stephanie Moran, 9, it's all about performing. "The music, it just got into me, ever since I was small," she said. She was both a little nervous and excited to perform in a beautiful concert hall in front of an audience, she said. She'd like to study science and art in college, she added.

The children's mothers were equally enthusiastic. "We're proud parents," said Marlene Ruddy, whose son, Morgan, plays the saxophone. That day, he had chosen to perform on campus rather than play soccer. Ruddy said she views music as a stepping stone toward college for children in the program. Morgan told his mother that UCSD was the best university.

Alice Marshall said she enrolled her twin sons, Antonneo and Antonneal, into the orchestra so they would get to see what life was like outside of Spring Valley. "There's another world out there," she said.

Music also helps with the children's brain development, said Irma Moran, Stephanie's mother. She and many of the other moms had a lot of good things to say



Irma Stephanie Moran, 9, on the stage at the Conrad Prebys

about the graduate students Music Center.
working with their children. "The
teachers do a very good job with the kids," Moran said. "They're very patient."

The program provides a great opportunity for the community, said Renell Nailon, director of the Spring Valley Community Center. "We have so much untapped talent," he said. "An innovative music program like this is unheard of."

The program came about when Nailon contacted Curtis, the UCSD music professor. The orchestra connects research and experimental music with children who don't have access to them, Curtis said. "The Universal Language Orchestra struck a chord for me," he said.

For so many young people, music is a commercial product, Curtis said. Bringing an abstract, refined type of music to children is a challenge, he added. But it's one that the three UCSD graduate students running the program said they relished.

"The thing that makes it most fantastic is that the community is a great one," said Tinkle, the lead student on the project.

The parents really are interested in the program, said Drew Allen, a doctoral student in composition. Parents also understand the cutting-edge music their children perform, said Joe Mariglio, a doctoral student who specializes in computerized music. "The children stand behind the music and the parents do too," he said.



Joe Mariglio, a graduate student in computer music, built instruments for the orchestra.

Tinkle, Mariglio and Allen first helped students master their homemade instruments. They broke the children into small instrument sections but also worked with them as an ensemble. The children came up with dancing moves, which they then translated into instrumental pieces. During the concert at Conrad Prebys Concert Hall, children performed one of the pieces they composed this way.

Keeping everyone in line was sometimes challenging, the three graduate students said. But they counted on the UCSD concert hall to give the children poise—and it did.

"They came into their own as performers," Mariglio said.

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