

Spring Concert Dazzles Audience in Spite of ‘Glitches’

By Jennifer Whalen

Photos by Chris Newkumet

The pitfalls of vanity, the struggle to do good, and the tenacity to overcome adversity were all themes highlighted during St. John’s spring concert and eighth grade musical. Students in grades one, three, and five delighted parents, friends and siblings with the witty lyrics and melodies from “Groovin’ with the Grimms,” a medley of songs based on the Grimms’ Fairy Tales. Eighth graders wowed the audience with a musical version of that classic Hans Christian Andersen tale, “The Emperor’s New Clothes.”

The evening’s performance could have gone poorly, as shortly before show time the sound system started picking up a local radio broadcast. Undaunted, the students sang their hearts out, projecting lyrics and lines clearly, all without the benefit of the sound system. “Sometimes adversity steps up a performance,” said Maggie Ruppert, St. John’s music teacher, after the show.

Supporting School Values

Mrs. Ruppert selected the collection of Grimms’ tunes and “The Emperor’s New Clothes” because of their relevance to the school’s values code. The songs and stories portrayed in a charming way many of the values taught at school. For example, the third grade “un-wicked witches,” decked in black pointy hats, begged for understanding as they sang:

We’re three un-wicked witches, what trying times we’ve had.
It really burns our britches, when people say we’re bad.
We’re three un-wicked witches. We try hard to be good.
Of course we have our glitches, but we’re just misunderstood.

Grades one, three and five warned the audience to “Be careful what you wish for” as you may get more than you bargained for:

It’s ok to make a wish. Wishing can be fun to do.
But without a magic fish, who will make your wish come true?
Patient study, work and time, may not be as fun or fast,
But they’ll help your wish come true, and they’ll make your treasure last.

The eighth graders kept up the theme with their funny version of “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” The townspeople begged the fashion-conscious emperor to hear their problems and make decisions. “Where is the emperor now? He must come back, he must preside and hear the latest news,” they sang, all to no avail.

Each time the emperor returned to stage he had less time for town business and wore an outfit more outrageous than before, everything from a pink feather boa to a pirate costume complete with stuffed parrot. The show culminated with audience members

howling with laughter as the emperor paraded around the auditorium in bright red long johns with Sponge Bob boxer shorts peaking out from the rear.

Meet Mrs. Ruppert

Mrs. Ruppert has been the music director at St. John's for 21 years. For the past 18 years, she's also been producing the eighth grade musical. She received her degree in music education from the State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo. Prior to coming to St. John's, she taught at two area Catholic schools as well as a semester at the American School in Madrid, Spain. "I always wanted to be a teacher," Mrs. Ruppert said. "I also had a talent for music. So I combined the two things that I liked the most and made a career out of it."

Students in grades one to eight receive music instruction twice a week, and Jr.-K and kindergarten students have music once a week. Students perform in the Christmas and Spring Concerts, talent show, monthly mass, as well as eighth grade and kindergarten graduations. Grades four and five also learn how to play the recorder. Through it all, Mrs. Colella has been her accompanist. "She's been my right arm," Mrs. Ruppert acknowledged. "She's my greatest cheerleader and encourages me when things are not going well. She's always there, and a remarkably talented person."

Everyone Can Sing

Her curriculum is performance based. All students perform on stage. "There are goals that I want the students to achieve. To sing, maintain a steady beat. My goal is to get them all there, where everyone is a singer," she explained. "I get upset when I hear parents say 'my child can't sing,' or 'I'm tone deaf.' Even if you can't be a performer, you can learn to appreciate music, be a fan, and have music in your life. We want to get the students performing as much as we can, as often as we can."

St. John's students are lucky to have music class twice a week. The archdiocese requires that students have 40 minutes of music instruction a week. "I get them twice a week for 50 minutes each time," Mrs. Ruppert explained. "Sister Kathleen is a tremendous supporter of the arts and a great supporter of the program. This is an opportunity for children who might not be that academically secure to find their voice in singing or performing. It builds their confidence and enables them to achieve academically as well."

The students began preparing for the spring show in February. She adjusts the scripts to ensure that everyone has a part. She divided the narrator lines in "Groovin' with the Grimms" so that each fifth grader had a speaking part. She did the same with "The Emperor's New Clothes." The part of the swindlers -- the Farabutto Brothers -- was originally written for two brothers. When three auditioned for the two roles, she decided to split the lines between the three students.

It's an ambitious undertaking to stage a musical, but one that has great value. "It teaches the students how to do a project from start to finish. They learn to take responsibility, to do their part. It's academic, with the students memorizing lines, and it's a creative

process,” explained Mrs. Ruppert. “They take real ownership and tremendous pride in a job well done.”

Her job, husband, and three children don’t leave Mrs. Ruppert with a lot of free time. One outside activity she did manage to squeeze into her busy schedule this year was singing at the mass for Pope Benedict XVI. “Professionally, it was one of the most challenging things I’ve ever done,” she said. “It was exhilarating. It was a privilege to be part of that liturgy.”

Congratulations to the students, teachers, Mrs. Ruppert and Mrs. Collella on another outstanding performance.