

Striking a common chord with good music

'Roads to You Tour' shares varied genres, cultures with pupils

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Sitting on the cafeteria floor at Robert Moton Elementary in Westminster, some of the children swayed to the rhythm of the musicians' beats, while others clapped to melodies they had never heard.

The tunes may have been unfamiliar, the lyrics sung in foreign languages and some of the instruments a bit exotic, but the pupils were nonetheless mesmerized by the alternately vibrant and soothing sounds emanating from the school's stage.

About 450 pupils at Robert Moton and hundreds more at West Middle in Westminster were treated last week to performances by a contingent of an ensemble of about 35 musicians from 19 countries - including Iran, Israel, Korea, Canada, Turkey and Denmark - that is touring the United States this month.

Called the "Roads to You Tour: Celebration of One World," the group's mission is to teach cross-cultural understanding through music.

"It's a good experience to understand other cultures," said Guc Gulle, a flamenco guitar player from Turkey who is studying jazz composition at Berklee College of Music in Boston. "It helps me re-understand my own culture by sharing it with others. ... The children have very good reactions to the music."

The ensemble launched the five-week nationwide tour this month with performances in Washington, D.C., including at the George Washington University, the National Building Museum and several schools in the Maryland and D.C. region. The musicians are scheduled to perform in Houston and Los Angeles and about 100 workshops in the coming weeks.

The group, created by Jordanian pianist Zade Dirani, 26, is backed by Jordan's Queen Noor, Berklee College of Music and Seeds of Peace, a nonprofit organization that helps teenagers from regions of conflict learn the skills of making peace. The tour also includes performers from the United States, Tunisia, Malaysia and the Dominican Republic.

The entire ensemble performs at larger venues and then breaks down into groups defined by their musical genres for smaller audiences at schools, community centers and private homes.

The smaller groups are made up of musicians with backgrounds in Middle Eastern, Latin American, Swedish, Turkish, Japanese, Celtic, folk, jazz and pop music.

The Middle Eastern group visited Robert Moton and a contingent of folk musicians performed at West Middle on Wednesday.

At Robert Moton, the musicians merged the sounds of a trumpet, a violin, an oud, a hammered dulcimer, the santur, the tabla and the congas. From one selection, the pupils experienced a Middle Eastern tune that incorporated the congas, an instrument more often associated with Latin American music.

The conga player, Evan Gutierrez, explained to the children that some Latin American music has a Middle Eastern influence.

The musicians' visits in Carroll were organized by Robert Moton's multicultural committee, including parent Andrea Shalal-Esa.

"We've really stepped up the amount of exposure the kids have to other cultures," Shalal-Esa said. "We want to give them other ways of seeing the world."

Lynn Uram, Robert Moton's guidance counselor who sits on the school system's countywide multicultural education committee, said the hope is that children will develop an increased awareness of other cultures and learn that people all over the world enjoy similar things, such as good music.

"It helps them feel a connectedness with other cultures," Uram said. "Ultimately, it helps them feel more accepting of others."

Shortly before the concert for the entire school, some of the musicians ate lunch with a group of pupils and answered questions about their music and their mission.

Fifth-grader Ian Cleary, who plays the bass guitar and favors rock music, peppered Gulle with questions about his interest in jazz and guitar.

"He was telling me it takes time to learn the guitar and a lot of practice," Ian said. "He's a jazz guitarist. ... He's inspired me to play jazz."

In addition to pondering his musical aspirations, Ian walked away from the luncheon and the performance with another thought.

"It was interesting talking to him because he's someone who has a lot of experience with the guitar," Ian said. "And if he becomes big someday, I'll be able to say I talked to him."

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