



Symphony Notes...

Children Are Natural Musicians

By Susan Haig, Music Director, The South Dakota Symphony Orchestra



Susan Haig

They tooted, squeaked, sawed, laughed, and were totally engaged by the “musical instrument petting zoo” following the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra’s Family Halloween Concert on October 27. Forty-five minutes after the concert had ended, children were still lining up for “one more try” on the huge brassy tuba, the intriguing-looking bassoon, the exotic oboe, or the warm, mellow viola.



What is it about music and musical instruments that so enralls young children?

Researchers have noted that few activities stimulate so many senses at

once, and involve such an intricate combination of skills. Movement, breathing, sound, sight, touch, even the smell of the instruments together create a powerful focus for children’s natural curiosity. Add the social dimension of music-making, and the teamwork and discipline required in orchestras, bands, and choirs, and it is easy to see why musical activities are regarded as powerful enhancements to learning and academic development.

Even infants have an inborn sense of rhythm generated from the mother’s heartbeat, and an obvious ability to express emotion through the most natural of musical instruments—their voices. So many studies have drawn connections between music and early



childhood development that the Louisiana legislature mandated the playing of classical music in daycare centers throughout the state. When governor Janklow encouraged the distribution of Mozart CDs in hospitals, he had strong logical and scientific justification for doing so.

Why, then, are there lingering questions of the relevance of arts to society at large? Perhaps because music and all the arts have sometimes been viewed as specialized domains for those who exhibit exceptional talent. The connection to arts at varying levels, simply for the pleasure of it, sometimes falls by the wayside during the self-conscious teenage years.

Fortunately, a new emphasis is being placed on integrating music and arts throughout the curriculum, and encouraging arts access and activity for all students, whatever their eventual fields of endeavor. Access to arts is coming to be viewed as a matter of fairness, and equal opportunity!

In the Sioux Falls region, we are blessed with a rich variety of musical activity in diverse forums, from vigorous choral and congregational singing, to jazz bands, folk bands, rock bands, municipal bands and impressively huge marching bands, to amateur and professional orchestras of various shapes and sizes.

The joy experienced through these activities is palpable, and is, to me, an exciting indication of our cultural vitality and potential for

further growth.

Music yields broad social and humanitarian value in our communities. When young citizens grow up in creative and imaginative environments, they may be able to respond with creativity and innovation to society’s future needs and challenges.

If they grow up with an appreciation of ideas and emotions conveyed through the universal languages of music and the arts, perhaps they will have greater empathy and appreciation for diverse cultural traditions throughout the world.

Music, after all, is a mode of understanding. What begins as pure joy and discovery for young children can lead, down the road, to a more creative and compassionate world. And that is something we all need.

