

Performing Arts Charter students find song inspiration in personal poems

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First came a quartet - three female singers and a guy strumming an acoustic guitar - singing lyrics about "heading up into the clouds." Next was a short instrumental workout among four other musicians, a pop melody that included piano, drums, guitar and bass. Then it was the turn of five young women, singing a Gospel-tinged tune about drinking buttermilk.

For many students at the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter Public School, playing music is a regular part of the curriculum. But in this case, middle school students like Celeste Amidon were taking on a special assignment: turning the poems of inner-city children into songs by creating melodies and arrangements for the words.

"We wanted to do something that was upbeat and optimistic, because that's what the poem's all about," said Amidon, one of three singers working on an early musical version of the poem "We're Heading Up," about succeeding in life. "This is a lot of fun. We're taking something that's really personal and trying to say the same thing with music."

For the last seven years, PVPA Middle School students have been collaborating with elementary school students from Harlem in New York City in what's known as the MAPS program: Music and Poetry Synchronized. Fourth- through sixth-graders from Harlem's Mosaic Preparatory Academy, P.S. 375, write poems based on their life experiences, and 12 of these works are then sent to PVPA. Seventh- and eighth-graders there then spend several weeks turning them into songs, writing original melodies in a variety of styles, including rock, pop, a cappella, folk and jazz.

The program culminates each May with a live performance of the poem/songs, alternating between PVPA and Mosaic Academy. This spring PVPA students will make the trip to New York to perform.

"It's been a great experience for everyone," said Tom Willits, a PVPA music teacher who leads the MAPS program. The students at Mosaic Academy "get a thrill from seeing their poems come to life with music - it's a real acknowledgement for them."

PVPA students in turn "have this artistic challenge on one level, and on another they get to experience a very different kind of environment when they learn what some of these kids' lives are like," Willits added. "They've formed a real bond with the kids there."

The impetus for the MAPS program came from Daniel Roberts, a New York-based playwright and educator who is married to Willits' step-daughter Nina. Roberts has taught poetry to Mosaic Academy students for the last several years.

Roberts said he introduced college-level poetry because he wanted to challenge his students: "I found the class was generally yawning and disengaged if I took the nursery-rhyme route. As soon as I told them Robert Frost wanted THEM to choose the path less traveled, their eyes got really wide and they related ... to their own life experiences."

Roberts contacted Willits and asked how PVPA and Mosaic Academy might collaborate. The two came up with the idea of MAPS, which Roberts says has provided a big confidence boost for his students.

"When the students hear their life stories being performed by a professional band ... it's such a sweet moment of self-worth, pride and absolute happiness ... and can get them through a rough summer."

On a recent Monday, the 17 students in Willits' class all seemed to be buzzing at once, waiting for their chance to take a crack at their songs. Willits explained that each group of three to five students would play part of their arrangements for the whole class, then break off to rehearse further.

"These are still works in progress," Willits said, noting that students were working out the basics of their arrangements - tempos, harmonies, verses and choruses - and hadn't finalized the instrumental lineups in some cases. Amidon, for instance, said her group, which also included singers Isabel Oram-Brown and Alexa Rodriguez and acoustic guitarist Jack Silverman, figured on eventually adding piano and drums to their song.

"OK, let 'er rip," Willits said to one group. But there was some confusion before they started on their poem/song, "Freedom": Piano player Oliver "Mark" Friedman wasn't sure when he was supposed to come in. "Is it after the first two measures?" he asked bassist Zeno Doeleman, who nodded yes.

Sophomore Lark Wicinas, who took Willits' course a few years ago, is a teaching assistant. She explained that students tend to pair up with friends when forming groups, or gravitate toward students who like similar music. Figuring out what style of music they want for a poem, and what tempo to use, "is a real collaborative process, and there needs to be a lot of give and take,"

she said. Generally, she added, students find a way to make it work, with assistance from her and Willits.

And, Wicinas said, PVPA students get to learn about students who often face very different challenges. "You'll read poems about how 'I don't want to go in my backyard because there's a man with a gun outside,'" she said.

Willits notes that when he started he took all students who were interested; now an audition is required. This year 17 of 38 students were accepted.

"I used to do most of the songwriting myself, which wasn't what I had in mind," he said. Now the musical ability of the class is higher, he said. He makes suggestions when needed, but otherwise, he said, "I let the kids run with this."

To turn poetry into a song, the student groups focus on a key set of lines that embodies the poem's theme, and use that as a chorus, turning other lines into verses. A five-member group, backed by eighth-grader George Holt on guitar, headed for a separate room to work on their arrangement of "Bully," with the chorus built around the lines "Now that I am older / And they don't bother me anymore / What's the worst they can say, that I am poor? / Bullies you see, are such the bores, / The best thing to do, is simply ignore."

"We were all kind of thinking we wanted to do an a cappella song, and it seemed to work really well on this," said seventh-grader Rocquel "Roci" Ackerman. "And when George started adding some chords to it, it came together even more."

Willits, who has experience as a performer, producer and songwriter - he once opened for Billy Joel - says MAPS has been a big plus for PVPA middle school students, sharpening their musical abilities and raising their awareness of larger social issues. The program's success has prompted PVPA to develop a similar partnership with a New York City high school, Urban Assembly School for Green Careers, that will begin next year.

"We think this is going to be a great expansion of the program," Willits said. "Plus they'll be working with students who are closer to them in age ... it's just a great way to build community."

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