

Song to Symphony event draws plenty of support

Chamber ensemble founder spends two months with Sherman School students creating lyrics and music

BY EMILY M. OLSON
Managing Editor

Eliot T. Bailen, founder and director of the Sherman Chamber Ensemble, joined forces with 185 students from the Sherman School for the Song to Symphony program, a collaborative songwriting effort that ended with a live performance at New Milford High School Nov. 16.

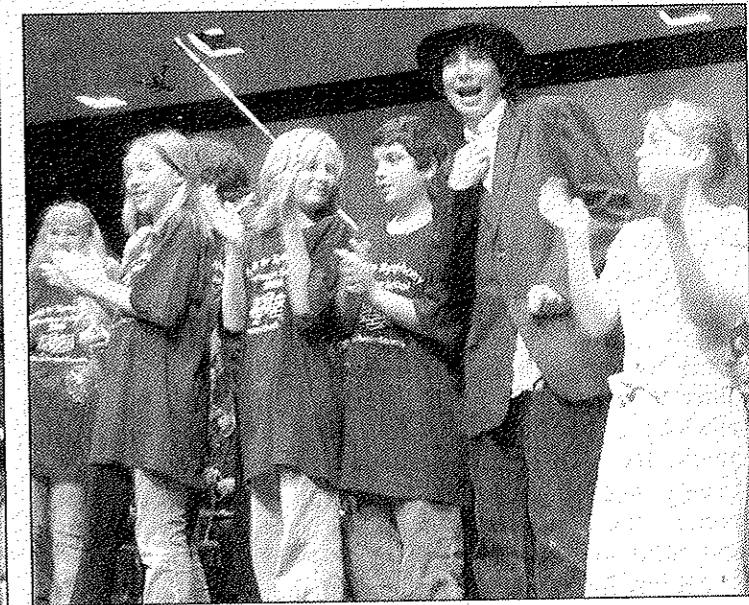
The Thursday night event drew more than 600 guests, including school staff, parents and friends to hear the children and musicians perform "An Immigrant's Story," a collection of songs staged to music and characters played by Sherman students.

"It was quite an event," Mr. Bailen said. "I'm always so amazed at the result—it's a lot of work, but when you see the children performing it's all worth it. They more than rise to the occasion—they do an outstanding job."

Mr. Bailen has offered the Song to Symphony program four times in Sherman. He also conducts individual workshops with students at the school during the year, and won't do such a large scale effort again until 2010, he said, mainly because of his hectic and busy schedule. But the Song to Symphony program is a labor of love for him and other members of the orchestra. This year, he invited 27 professional musicians to participate on stage with the students in "An Immigrant Story," which also included the Sherman School chorus and a band of student actors and actresses.

Michelle Baird, Sherman School's gifted and talented educator, chose to help stage the production this year.

"It doesn't always happen that way," Mr. Bailen said. "Sometimes [the performance] is just music, but I asked her if she wanted to script it and she did a fabulous job. It really took shape



Photographs courtesy of Sherman Chamber Orchestra

Left, the Sherman School chorus performs with musicians during last week's Song to Symphony event at New Milford High School, and above, children act out dramatic roles during the show, titled "An Immigrant's Story." Under the guidance of Sherman Chamber Ensemble founder and musician Eliot Bailen and members of the school faculty and administration, the students wrote songs for the musical, which was directed by Orchestra New England's James Sinclair.

in only about two months, which is pretty amazing."

The most important part of the Song to Symphony program is the classroom work, Mr. Bailen said, which is where ideas are born and the children involved learn about the creative process. At the start of the program, he distributes a fact sheet to parents whose children will be involved, explaining the process of songwriting. "Song to Symphony is a large-scale musical production which involves a large segment of the school population in the creation of a musical production," he said. "It motivates children to write, create and perform their own original musicals where they feel ownership and pride and are deeply hooked into music through an unforgettable musical experience."

He chose the immigrant theme "to create a beautiful musical drama that brings life

and understanding to immigrant heritage of our nation," he said.

Once the theme is chosen, the work begins, and Mr. Bailen spends time in the classroom with the students, explaining the elements of songwriting and getting them excited about the process.

"I have a system of songwriting that I present to the kids," he added. "We brainstorm song ideas in the classroom, and I have taken to writing my own scripts before I get there which basically suggests song ideas. We divide those ideas up between the classrooms and eventually you develop the musical production."

This year, the Song to Symphony program included students in grades 3-8, many of whom are members of the chorus. Children in grades six, seven and eight were invited to play various dramatic roles, Mr. Bailen said. The lower grades

wrote the songs, while older students gathered more information by interviewing residents who had a special immigration story to tell.

"They're the songwriters and the actors, and they collaborate with the chamber members," Mr. Bailen said. "They really take ownership of the production."

He also involved numerous educators at the school, including a team led by language arts teacher Mary McEvoy, as well as interim principal Jay Voss, music teacher Terry Pitcher and Ms. Baird.

This year, Mr. Bailen invited his friend James Sinclair, conductor of Orchestra New England, to lead the assembled orchestra and students the night of the show.

"That was pretty exciting," Mr. Bailen said. "He's an old friend, and it was really fun to have him involved."

"It's also a challenge, because

it's a crazy event," he added. "The score was about 150 pages long, and it hasn't ever been played before. He basically has an hour to run through it with the orchestra and rehearse it with the kids, and then it's time to go on. It's a real challenge for everyone."

In spite of the challenges and the tremendous amount of time involved in producing the event, Mr. Bailen says he's rewarded by the students' enthusiasm and the end result—a night of music they've created themselves.

"I try to find ways to make it easier every year, because it's really hard. It's very time consuming," he said. "It's really gratifying though. I'm a professional cellist, but songwriting is in my heart, it's something I enjoy doing so much. I believe in it deeply and I look forward to hearing those songs sung by real voices."

"It's also a way to get something staged, and so it's a little

selfish on my part," he said with a laugh. "A lot of people write musicals, but they never see them staged. To see a creative, full-fledged effort come to fruition is exciting. And seeing how the kids react, as thing start to come together, is wonderful."

Now that the Song to Symphony event is over, Mr. Bailen is back to work, teaching and rehearsing for his next performance.

He and his fellow musicians will perform this weekend in Sherman and Kent, in the group's annual jazz celebration concerts. The Best of Sherman Chamber Ensemble Jazz, highlighting favorite works of jazz will be held Saturday at 4 p.m. at the Sherman Congregational Church, 6 Church Road, Sherman, and Sunday at 3 p.m. at St. Andrew's Church, 1 North Main St., Kent, intersection of Route 7 and 341. The concerts are free. For more information, call 860-355-5930.

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