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Quartet strings stories of travels

By Matt Perkins/Daily News staff

WALTHAM - The harmonies of four stringed instruments transported fourth-graders to other lands.

"Today, we're going to use our string quartet as a boat to cross the ocean," Judy Eissenberg, violinist for the Lydian String Quartet, told a nearly filled Slosberg Recital Hall at Brandeis University yesterday.

The Lydian String Quartet's boat, of course, took fourth-graders on a voyage to different parts of the world, exploring music that has been brought to America by its many immigrants.

"People made their way to the New World for many reasons," explained viola player Mary Ruth Ray.

The concert was part of a program called MusicUnitesUS, which was founded by Eissenberg, and is meant to bring Waltham students to the Brandeis campus to connect social studies and social justice issues with diverse music.

Students prepared for yesterday's concert through a MusicUnitesUS lesson plan called, "Immigration in America," which was designed to create awareness and appreciation of the immigrant experience, while at the same time challenge students to consider the injustices several immigrants face. The concert itself focused on varying musical traditions that immigrants have brought to the United States.

"Today I thought was particularly reflective of what they're (students) learning in class," said Steve Goodwin, director of social studies for Waltham schools.

The quartet's sound filled the Slosberg Recital Hall with hymns, folk pieces and dance music from around the world, playing pieces by Russian, Chinese, African, Irish and Haitian composers, as well as famous pieces by Mozart, Beethoven and even famous jazz composer Duke Ellington.

"I thought it was very interesting," MacArthur Elementary fourth-grader Katie Maehl, 10, said after the show. "I really liked it and I'm ready to hear it again."

The emotion of quartet's sound, as some pieces were reflective of mourning and sorrow, did not escape some of the students.

"I think it was pretty awesome," said MacArthur fourth-grader Allen Cummings, 9. "I wanted to cry but I tried as much as I could to not."

Each member of the quartet explained the background of a piece before they were performed.

"I particularly like this song because my name's Danny, too," said violinist Dan Stepner, who referred to the quartet's rendition of the famous Irish piece, "O Danny Boy," a piece expressing nostalgia of the Irish homeland prior to the potato famine in the mid-19th century.

Eissenberg quizzed the audience by reading - "The New Colossus" - the poem that's engraved on the Statue of Liberty, and which is noted for the line: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

She then asked students what they believed the meaning to be.

Cellist Joshua Gordon told the story behind the quartet's version of a piece by Russian composer Dimitri Shostakovich, who dedicated it to the memory of all war victims. Gordon asked the crowd to use its imagination during the performance, as the piece was explosive with emotion and intensity, emulating the sounds of battle.

"It sounded like they were having a real war," said Edward Lo, 9, also a fourth-grader at MacArthur. "They seem like they had perfect melody and beats."

Eissenberg said one of the main ideas behind playing such diverse and immigrant-influenced music is to close the unfamiliar gap between foreigners and domestic residents of all countries.

"My hope is that people are one step farther away from making assumptions about each other," said Eissenberg, who added that she couldn't put the diverse population of the fourth-grade student body behind her.

"You look at this bunch of kids, and all the cultures of the world are in this room," she said.

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