

Music in the School

Washington Island, WI

Fall report for school year 2018-2019
November 27, 2018

Because November 11, 2018, marked the 100th Anniversary of the Armistice ending WWI, that is, "The War to End All Wars", I chose to begin this year focusing on music appreciation. In this case the composer we studied was George M. Cohan, American born great-grandson of Irish immigrants, and renowned Broadway performer, producer, composer, dancer and writer.

We watched excerpts of the 1942 movie about George M. Cohan, entitled "Yankee Doodle Dandy". This film, starring James Cagney as George M. Cohan, in addition to telling the story of our composer's life, gave the students a quick look at what musical entertainment looked like before television or computers were invented. It also helped to explain how music and musical entertainers played an important part in the life of our country.

The song that Cohan wrote at the time of the entry of the US into WWI in 1917 is called, of course, "Over There". It was so effective in bringing cohesion to American sentiments about the war in Europe that Cohan was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for it and for his other patriotic favorite, "Grand Old

Flag". (He remains the only American composer to have been so honored.)

The children at school learned to sing "Over There", and we performed it, (along with "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean"), at the recent American Legion sponsored Veteran's Day observances at the TPAC. The students also joined the adult audience in singing a variety of patriotic favorites chosen by the American Legion. As always, I try to explain to the students how much their participation means to the older adult population of the Island.

Then, thanks to our having at our disposal sixteen portable keyboards and earphones gifted to the Washington Island Music Festival by Steve Colburn, Marlee Sabo and friends, the students learned that they are also able to play "Over There", as well as to sing it. What an exciting discovery! What an amazing resource!

The focus this year, as always, is on

1. music appreciation ,
2. musical performance,
3. **and** music literacy.

Having just concluded a major study of music appreciation and performance, we intend now to move firmly into music literacy study. I want the students to gain experience and confidence in reading and writing music for themselves.

Over many years I have employed a method of teaching young children both **solfege**, using numbers, and **rhythm reading**,

using a modified Kodaly approach. As a result, last spring some of our very youngest students were able to "write" music which was accurate with regard to rhythm notation and scale step notation. They were so excited and ready to experiment.

I played the "compositions" for the students in their own classes, and also in the other grade level classes. The composition which was most frequently asked for among all the students was a cleverly crafted five measure piece written by young George Findlay. (George is now in second grade.)

In response to this "consensus", I promised George that I would orchestrate his composition for the Concert Band to play. That is why George's piece, which he entitled "Opus One", was played at a Washington Island Concert Band performance held at the Washington Island School on November 6, 2018.

It was very wonderful to see George stand to be acknowledged as the "composer" of this interesting piece. I will admit that, being the first time in my experience that such a thing had ever taken place, I was also very excited and happy.

All the school's students and faculty were in attendance at the concert, which was held in the school Commons. Numbers of our own elementary instrumental students were seated with the adult band members and joined in on certain selections. It was a very memorable occasion for both students and the performing adults.

Somebody, it would appear, has now taken this a step further.

I have been contacted by a reporter from the Door County Advocate who is planning to come to the Island soon to learn more about the work we are doing, and about George's "Opus One" in particular.

Since that performance, there have also been a number of inquiries from other students regarding "how to apply" for having his/her own compositions performed by the band. I welcome all entries and look forward to there being a burst of enthusiasm for learning music literacy, and for student composition.....

This school year is my eighth year teaching the Music in the School program. For the first seven years our program has been available only to students in grades one through eight. This year, however, because of high school scheduling conflicts, the eighth grade class is being joined for music study by some members of the high school classes, ninth through twelfth. Most all of these students have been participants in the "Music in the School" program in years past, but are now getting a refresher course during their high school tenure as well.

Our instrumental program continues with "before school" and "after school" lesson times. At present we have fourteen students working on a variety of band instruments and guitar. After the exciting opportunity for some of these musicians to play for the "Mayfest" gathering at the Island Dairy, I believe they have a better concept of what ensemble work is like. We will look for new opportunities to perform together.

The TPAC Holiday program this year is scheduled for December 8, 2018. Donna Russell has written an original play which explores the life of Mrs. Santa Claus. She has invited numbers of our students to participate in parts of this inventive drama.

She has also asked for my participation in preparing our third and fourth grade students to sing a song asking Mrs. Santa Claus to tell us about her life. Knowing of no such song, I wrote one entitled, "Mrs. Santa Claus - What About You?" We began practicing it in class today. Ask me if I am having fun?

I will also report that our new principal, Michelle Kanipes, has been extremely supportive of our efforts and appreciative of the results. It is wonderful to work with people who value the same things we value, and are willing to make the commitment to support our efforts.

That attestation, of course, applies most specifically to the Washington Island Music Festival. Without your commitment to provide the means for our Island students to receive a musical education, it is very unlikely that they would otherwise do so. My own personal involvement brings me joy and satisfaction which would be impossible to describe. How can I say "thank you" enough for what you do for us as a community.

Donna L Briesemeister