

Third Grade Can Be Fun

By Carol Perkins

Last year I was asked to play two songs for the third grade performance at their elementary school Spring concert.

The first song, an Italian folk song titled "Bella Bimba," was as accompaniment to the children singing. Funny thing - I had learned that very song many years ago in the fifth grade.

The second song was to be selected by the music teacher when I arrived; she had asked me to bring some polka music.

The end of the concert would feature the third graders using this music to teach their parents and siblings a polka-type dance which would then be performed by everyone in a group.

When I arrive for the first rehearsal there were 93 eight year olds in the music room and the energy level was amazing. I definitely gained a huge amount of respect for the teacher! Each teacher had about 31 students, but for music they all came together with only one music teacher.

The children had been working on the lyrics to Bella Bimba for weeks and almost everyone knew it perfectly. I used my Musette switch which the music teacher felt matched the light, high sound of a children's' choir perfectly.

While the kids had a break, the music teacher listened to a few measures of each of the polkas (I had bought sheet music for 8 songs) & quickly decided on "Sorbischer Mädchentanz", a lively, peppy & fun Pomeranian folk song.

She mentioned how rewarding it would be for her to see "eight year old boys who usually wouldn't be caught dead on a dance floor"!

Because the class had practiced the steps without music - (a heel-toe, heel-toe, slide, slide, slide & reverse) - they were eager to try it with music. And very eager to be the ones teaching their parents on concert night!

I had wondered what the kids would be like, & almost all were bright, interested & curious. They had so many questions that their teacher asked if I could come on extra time just to talk to them & answer questions.

THIRD GRADE CAN BE FUN

PART 2

BY CAROL PERKINS

This is the second and final installment of "Third Grade Can Be Fun."

For those of you looking for a happy ending and validation of what the accordion can accomplish, I think you will find it here.

But first, a word about the power of "Thank you." When the music teacher first contacted me, she asked how much I would charge and I told her I would volunteer my time.

After that the school principal made a special point of coming to the music room to thank me every single time I was there. (Or maybe she had heard tales of misbehaving accordion players!)

In any case, what a great lesson for all those 8 year olds to see her do that.

About two weeks after the concert, I received in the mail a thick 9 x 12 packet. In it were 93 brightly colored and laboriously written thank you notes from each child!

These notes ranged from one or two barely legible printed lines to entire pages of flowing cursive complete with illustrations. (Unicorns were very popular!)

One little girl wrote, "I would really like to play the accordion, but I don't know which bottoms to push." Well, I guess we've all been there!

And speaking of thanks, since you are reading this in our wonderful newsletter, a long overdue thanks to ELAINE RITZKA, and of course JERRY SMEISKA.

Of all the organizations we have been in, this is the only one where the newsletter is sent out on time every time. It is appreciated!

Concert day began with a rehearsal in the gymnasium. While the kids practiced marching in & aligning themselves on the risers, I discovered my perfect spot at the corner where the risers meet the small stage. Here I had a straight sight-line to the director for accompaniment on the first song and could then unobtrusively fade behind the risers to reappear on stage at the end of the concert for the final audience participation dance.

The rehearsal went well, but as had happened several times before, the kids got excited and started singing faster and faster, not really following their director.

The first time that had happened, I asked the music teacher if I should "cover" for them and follow their rhythm. Absolutely not, she replied, it's part of learning music and they need to learn correctly right from the start.

She also told the group that if that happened, she would stop them even if it was during the concert.

An all-school assembly plus many grandparents (avoiding night driving) comprised the dress rehearsal held at the end of the school day.

Grandparents had rows of folding chairs while 1st, 2nd, 4th grades, kindergarteners and Special Ed kids sat on the floor. When the time came for everyone to learn the dance, a few grandparents participated, but mostly it was a field day for the little kids. No, they didn't "Learn" the steps but they definitely learned the joy of hopping and bopping and bouncing to music. Hopefully they also learned the special, joyous & unique sound of accordion music.

Since there wasn't time for me to drive home & back again, before the early evening performance, I enjoyed a sandwich I had bought along & some quiet time in the teachers' lounge. (The music teacher had even graciously invited me home with her but I thought she served some quiet time too!)

She did ask, since I was staying in the building, if I would move to the gym as "undercover security" once the school doors reopened, to keep an eye on all the instruments, music stands, posters, etc., that she had in readiness for the concert.

When the doors opened, almost all the kids & families first toured their respective classrooms to show off art work and projects.

Almost all. As I sat on the sidelines, a white-haired lady found herself a central seat & since we were alone in the gym, called over; "I have 2 grandsons in the program, but it's too hard for me to walk to all the classrooms."

She asked if I had a grandchild in the concert & I said, "No, I'm the accordion player." Her expression saddened.

"I used to play so much & my husband loved it," she told me. "But he passed away a few years ago & I haven't been able to play since."

Before we could continue the conversation, it got very loud & very crowded very quickly as families poured in from the classrooms.

The concert began.

The first song went great. The kids watched their teacher & showed amazing poise for third graders! So now I could relax until the final polka.

Several sets of parents had been taught the dance earlier & came up on the stage while I played so that the others could watch their steps. Mostly the rows of folding chairs were quickly piled on the sides & it was great to see up to four generations filling the gym & enjoying the accordion music of a centuries old Pomeranian folk dance.

When the music ended, the gym felt like the inside of a popcorn popper on steroids. The kids were wild & parents & grandparents were hugging & congratulating them on a concert well-done.

At this point I was totally focused on packing up & getting an early start home, in order to reach "familiar driving territory" before dark.

So at first I didn't notice my white-haired lady friend from before the concert. I had no reason to expect to see her again & her walk from the gym floor to the stage was now crowded with pushing, jostling kids, strollers, infant car seats and walkers.

I looked up as she approached me, her expression bright & determined. Somewhat breathlessly she asked, "Can you send me the music to that song?"

And so.....of course.....I did.