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Miami Music Project stops at MSMS

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Miami Music Project's Brass Ensemble

With the swing of a jazz beat and the sway of a Cuban danzón, students at Miami Springs Middle School got into a melodic groove recently when they were paid a visit by a very unique musical ensemble.

The Miami Music Project Brass Quintet made a stop at the school April 23 to deliver an upbeat introduction to a variety of genres and styles that make up the cultures and sounds of Miami.

The musicians — Jason Koi on tuba, Burt Mason on trombone, Christine Witkowski on French horn, Samuel Hyken on trumpet, and Andrew Roseborough, also on trumpet —

opened with an instrumental version of Shakira's "My Hips," something all the students were familiar with and were eager to identify.

"Everything we'll play today will celebrate the cultures and 'melting pot' of Miami," said Koi. "Shakira was born in Colombia, and was known from a very young age. She started to borrow influences from other cultures. She took elements of rock 'n' roll, Bollywood, and others. She created her own unique musical style. That's very much like Miami. Many musicians here come from other countries and pick and choose the things they like and develop their own musical styles."

According to the Miami Music Project, its mission is "to make potent music education and live performances accessible to thousands of under-served people each year. The main focus of the Miami Music Project is education and community engagement."

The organization sends small ensembles of young musicians to schools throughout the county, performing various genres such as classical, jazz, or the variety presented at Miami Springs Middle School, in order to expose quality live music to students who might not otherwise have the opportunity to enjoy it.

The musicians engage the students in live, interactive shows, asking questions and using humor while playing music that the students find engaging and exciting. They put the music into social and historical context, telling stories about where the music comes from.

"This next piece is Italian," explained Witkowski in her introduction of a tarantella that really got the students' attention. "It originated in the early 1900s when people were getting bitten by spiders. They would do this dance

to get rid of the venom.”

More than 200 students enrolled in the school's fine arts, technology, foreign language and gifted classes attended the performance.

“Students who attended the performances were thrilled,” said Noila Ortega, music director at the school and one of the parties involved in organizing the event. “They did not want the concert to end.”

Still in its infancy, the Miami Music Project was founded in 2008, created by former Florida Philharmonic Music Director James Judd. He currently serves as the organization's artistic director. The organization couldn't have come around at a better time.

These are tenuous times for arts programs in public schools. Just last week, Broward schools announced their arts programs would be cut by half or eliminated entirely at selected schools, despite recognized benefits to the students.

“I feel this is an excellent and worthy project,” said Ortega. “Students need to experience live performances. Our youth will only enhance and expand their education and musical growth by listening to a variety of musical styles and repertoire. What better way to do this than at a comfortable setting at their own school auditorium? They do not all have the possibilities or economic means to attend these events at theaters or musical arenas, so bringing MMP to schools, to our school in particular, and have professional musicians share their views and experiences with the students is awesome!”

Among other pieces performed by the quintet were a fugue by Johann Sebastian Bach; the reggae song “One Love” by Bob Marley; an Argentine tango; a classical piece by Claude Debussy; a klezmer birthday tune from Israel; and a traditional Cuban danzón by Latin jazz artist Paquito D’Rivera.

The Miami Music Project's presentations extend beyond the stage; classroom lessons are offered for the teachers to use with the students, which enhance the live performance experience.

“The Miami Music Project representatives e-mailed lessons for us to instruct the students prior to their visitation,” said Ortega. “We lectured on the coming event, the players, the music genre, and its history. After the presentation, students discussed the performance orally with their teachers.

“Some teachers elected to have the students write journals, others required critique papers, others like us, the musicians, reviewed their choice of music and replayed some of the musical selections in class. Even further, we extended our instruction to go more into details pertaining to the musical style, rhythmic details, and its correlation to today's musical world.”

The students' reactions were resoundingly positive.

“Students who attended the performances were thrilled,” said Ortega. “They did not want the concert to end. Of course, it is needless to say, they will welcome the Miami Music Project in the future again!”

Seventh-grader Gabrielle Enriquez posted her support on the organization's Facebook page, an articulation that echoed many of the students' sentiments on the popular social networking site: “You guys really changed my view of music. For the best, of course. The manipulation of tone found in pieces performed by you all really let me feel the music like I haven't felt it in a while. Thank you guys for visiting, hope you can come again next year!”

The organization's managing director, Anna Pietraszko, added, “What I really love (about Miami Springs Middle School) is that the kids pay FULL attention to what is happening onstage and they really appreciate it. It is clear to us that they love music and truly enjoy these concerts because they always ask us to come back.”

Supporters of the Miami Music Project include Miami Dade County Public Schools, the John S. And James L. Knight Foundation, Miami Dade County, and the Arsht Center. For more information, search for them online at Facebook.com.

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