

Young musicians make international connection

MCS forms cultural exchange with Mexicali orchestra

By DAVID GUNTER
Feature correspondent

SANDPOINT — The Music Conservatory of Sandpoint took another step toward establishing itself as a national-caliber arts school last month when four of its students traveled to Mexicali, Mexico, from March 16-25 to take part in a cultural exchange program. Young musicians from Mexico will return the favor this summer, as they venture north to perform for Sandpoint audiences.

The group was hosted by the Centro Estatal de las Artes (CEART), which put them through their musical paces almost as soon as they got off the plane. Within two days of their arrival, the Sandpoint musicians were on stage in a performance that included a full orchestra from the Mexicali conservatory.



—Courtesy photo

Musicians from the Music Conservatory of Sandpoint recently returned from a cultural exchange tour to Mexicali, Mexico, where they played in concert with students from that country. Young musicians from Mexico will return the favor when they travel to Sandpoint to perform in August. Far left, Keegan Bernardin; second from left, Torrin Bernardin; fourth from left, Nichol Reed; center, Caytlin Driggs; far right, Kai Whitley.

See MUSICIANS, Page 3

MUSICIANS

Continued from Page 1

"We got some of the music just a week before the trip, so there was a lot of sight-reading," said 19-year-old Keegan Bernardin.

"We had seven-hour practice days — it was pretty rigorous," said his brother Torrin, 18.

According to ensemble director Caytlin Driggars, who accompanied the local students on the trip, rigor is part of the CEART culture. Students enrolled in the government-sponsored program go straight from school to the conservatory, where they put in three to four hours of daily practice in dance, choir or the orchestra.

"But most of the students there are waiting to get into the orchestra," Driggars said. "It's very sought-after because it's a complete orchestra with strings, woodwinds, brass — everything."

Both the Music Conservatory of Sandpoint and the orchestra at CEART were formed two-and-a-half years ago, putting the students roughly on par in terms of ability.

"We wanted them to be

on the same level, so they could perform the same music," conservatory co-founder Ruth Klinginsmith explained.

Most of the communication between the internationally blended groups took place through music, which really did prove to be a universal language.

"Especially when Caytlin was directing," said Keegan.

"I'm very expressive with my hands," Driggars acknowledged, adding that this directorial trait helped to overcome her admittedly limited command of the Spanish language. "There are lots of ways to communicate."

Good thing, since CEART orchestra director Antonio Mallavé Ruda informed her that they would be trading musicians starting with the first rehearsal.

"They planned it down to a 'T' for us," Driggars said. "And I got a lot more conducting experience down there than I ever thought I would."

At about \$700 per student, the cost for the trip was kept largely in check because the Sandpoint musicians stayed with families in Mexicali. Things also were smoothed out

by the involvement of conservatory student Nichol Reed, who, along with her mother, Eleanor, acted as translators on the trip.

"Eleanor has been part of the Music Conservatory of Sandpoint since the beginning," said Klinginsmith. "They go to Mexicali each year and her children play in that orchestra there."

While Nichol was familiar with the school, the three young men who joined her on the cultural exchange were new to the surroundings. For 15-year-old Kai Whitley, it was his first time abroad, as well as his first time on an airplane.

"I'd love to do more international trips," he said, noting that the biggest difference he noticed between the two cultures was the conducting style of the directors. "Antonio is more calm than Caytlin. There's not many dynamics with Antonio."

One reason, Driggars interjected, is the wide age group the Mexican director has to work with.

"They have kids from 8-19, so he's working with a really broad range of ability," she said. "That's quite a feat."

"But there are some

advanced students there, as well," Keegan said. "Especially in the chamber orchestra."

This August, four advanced students from the CEART ensemble will travel to Sandpoint, where they plan to perform for local audiences.

"Mallavé would love to be able to form an orchestra with all the students here at the conservatory," Driggars said, explaining that such a group would include about 20 players in all. As the conservatory continues to grow its programs in stringed instruments, vocal music and theatre arts, future exchanges are definitely on the agenda, according to the co-founder.

"This was our first international adventure and it's something we want to do more of," she said.

The Sandpoint students felt like visiting dignitaries at CEART, particularly the young men, who were a focal point of attention for the girls in the Mexican orchestra. Fortunately, their presence did not cause an international incident or create tension between them and the boys who were part of that group. To the contrary, the cross-border communica-

tion worked flawlessly, especially when the musicians had instruments in hand.

"We found a lot more similarities than differences between us, for sure," said Keegan. "As young adults, our interests and pursuits were pretty much the same."

One reason the performing arts school wanted to mount the trip south was to introduce young players to the idea of thinking beyond national borders when considering a career in music.

"There are lots of international opportunities for musicians," said the ensemble director, "and this was a great gateway for opening up people's ambitions to that."

"It was inspiring," said Keegan. "And it opened my eyes to music in other countries and opportunities with international orchestras."

His brother, Torrin, nodded in agreement.

"The more music, the better," he said.

For more information on the conservatory and its school of performing arts, visit the group online at: www.sandpointconservatory.org, or call (208) 265-4444.