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SAGE makes Triple Hill Music Festival appearance at Pennington School

By Deena Parham

SAGE, the distinguished all-women's jazz, blues, and contemporary ensemble, performed recently at the Pennington Elementary School in Mount Vernon. The group appeared as part of the extraordinary Triple Hill Music Festival, a program of the Westchester Arts Council.

Pennington Principal Danielle Davis welcomed the students to hear the special afternoon concert. Sheila Baptista, President of Lewis and Kirk Music, and the group's manager, introduced the talented musicians. The SAGE performers at Pennington included Lakecia Benjamin on saxophone, Bernice Brooks on drums, Krystle Ford on violin, Miki Hayama on piano, Andrea Rohlehr on flute and vocals, and Miriam Sullivan on bass.

Baptista said, "I formed SAGE in 2002, based on my experiences with wonderful women musicians. A lot of women work together, but not as often as they would like to." The lively elementary school students could not contain their joy, as they quickly embraced the music appreciation lessons provided by SAGE. Miriam Sullivan, a bassist, taught the students how to play and listen to the blues, as the group performed "Route 66."

The auditorium soon erupted in spontaneous movement, as the children were given a demonstration of what rhythm is, when they were told to clap in three parts. Sullivan gave the students a quick history lesson - "Africans brought that element of rhythm. That's what makes you dance. It's called syncopation, and you will find it in jazz, Afro-Cuban, Latin, salsa, reggae, and hip-hop."

Sullivan surveyed the students to ask them what their favorite music was. By a show of hands, and affirmative shouts, a majority openly professed their love for hip-hop music.

Without missing a pivotal teaching opportunity, Sullivan connected the theory that is behind the popular music genre. "Improvisation is when you have an idea, but you are really just making it up on the spot. The rappers do that when they flow a rhyme of poetry and create a story on the spot."

Sullivan turned and charged the band to "play something funky!" Suddenly, the students swayed to the Stevie Wonder classic, "Isn't She Lovely." Pennington students later joined SAGE members in a conga line dance around the auditorium.

Each musician performed a solo, and quizzed the students about the musical role that their instrument played within the group. Bernice Brooks, on drums, invited an aspiring musician onstage to demonstrate beat, rhythm, and time. Brooks said, "Music takes you all over the world - to Africa, Japan, Europe, and the Caribbean. You can go around the world just by listening to different styles of music."

Krystle Ford showed the students how she was able to play the violin with a bow, or simply use the playing technique called pizzicato - the plucking of the instrument's strings. Students were in awe, as Ford played a hit by R & B superstar, Usher, and then quickly switched to a country music tune to demonstrate the instrument's versatility.

Flutist, Andrea Rohlehr, performed "Summertime" for the students. Lakecia Benjamin described how the saxophone makes you feel real good! "The most important job of my instrument is that I can get you to dance! When I come up here, I come to party! Music is about having a good time. The saxophone is a way of speaking, and expressing without words."

Miki Hayama, a pianist from Japan, explained the elements of harmony, created by the piano, using the onstage keyboard. Moments later, Hayama journeyed offstage to play an impromptu classical composition on the school's piano. SAGE ended their hour-long set with the theme song from The Flintstones.

After the concert, several students from the school's music program remained to participate in a master class. The musicians were asked many questions, such as what inspired them to play, and their insights on being professional musicians.

Donna Jackson, the festival's Creative Director, said that it was wonderful to see how excited the students were to hear SAGE. She noted that the program was a great benefit to the students, who were able to embrace new music, and to the artists, who shared their vast musical knowledge.



SAGE in concert



Pennington student joins SAGE members onstage



Violinist Krystle Ford demonstrates the pizzicato technique



Bernice Brooks leads students in a conga line