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Education

'Iowa Spring' debuts at spring concert

Middle-school musicians meet, work with composer

By **AMY LAMAR**
REGISTER STAFF WRITER
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By all accounts, composer Paul Seitz has captured the essence of Iowa in the song "Iowa Spring."

Orchestra director Michele Senger describes it as calm, tranquil and beautiful, and sophisticated - especially for the West Des Moines fifth-graders who played it at their spring concert Tuesday.

The piece was actually written in January in Las Vegas, where Seitz is a visiting professor in composition and music theory at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. He only had to step outside to get a feel for the spring-like temperatures, but it was his Wisconsin roots that initiated the writing process, he said.



GARY FANDEL/REGISTER PHOTOS

The fifth-grade orchestra at Westridge Elementary School performed an original piece, "Iowa Spring," composed especially for them by Paul Seitz, at Tuesday's spring concert.



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"This time of year is special because there are so many changes during the spring," he said from his home last week. "I tried to write something that the kids could take ownership of."

The Westridge Elementary School orchestra seemed to have accomplished that at its final practice before joining 150 other West Des Moines school district fifth-graders for the concert. The sound of their instruments, which include the violin, viola, cello and bass, filled the hallway last week as they worked to perfect the more difficult segments of the piece.



Alex Zhou, a third-grader, is a member of the fifth-grade orchestra.

"The notes are technically not difficult, but musically it's a stretch for the kids," said Senger, orchestra director for Westridge and Valley Southwoods Freshman High School. "But I'm sure they're going to rise to the occasion and do a great job."

All but one practice took place at the students' home schools, which culminated with a rehearsal directed by Seitz the day of the concert. He also spent time talking with the students, which was an opportunity on par with meeting a celebrity, Senger said.



Practicing on violin, above, are Amanda Krook, left, Katie Tank, Mollie Sims and Savanna Merck.

Hayden Goldstien, a bass player at Westridge, couldn't wait to meet Seitz. His published works include "In the Moment's Light," which has been performed by high school honors orchestras and all-state orchestras in 15 states.



That piece has strong harmonies and melodies, and "everyone (in the orchestra) had something interesting to do," Senger said. "Iowa Spring," on the other hand, introduces a new technique called harmonics, which is a high octave division reached when the hand placement is halfway between either end of the instrument. It also requires students to play with "richness in tone," Senger said.

Seitz's goal was to vaguely echo Aaron Copeland's composing strategies in "Appalachian Spring," he said, and require different parts of the orchestra to move at contrasting speeds at the same time. The result is more musical independence for the students.

"I like the harmonic notes and how everything fits together really well," said Savanna Merck, viola player at Westridge.

This is the third time that the Valley Orchestra Guild has commissioned a composition for its spring concert. The pieces go on to be published and are widely used by orchestras across the country, Senger said.

"It's an opportunity to work with a living composer and have input in the composition process," she said. "It's nice to expand the repertoire of music for all students."

Hayden had some advice for Seitz as practiced wrapped up last week: "Keep writing," he said.



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