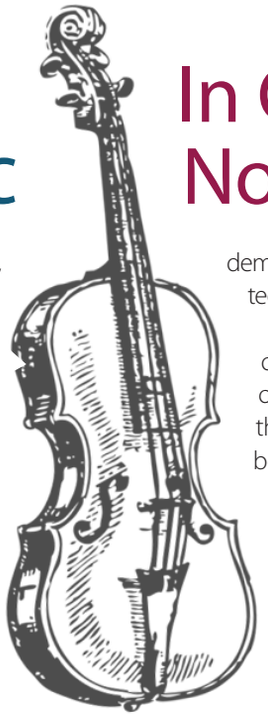
Reflections Through Music



DCβJ

ahliyedi

violin

In Cherokee, North Carolina

On a sunny Monday morning in September 2017, Cherokee Elementary School students filed into the Gathering Place at their school campus, a pavilion with dramatic windows and skylights that blur the line between the indoors and outdoors. With a view of Western North Carolina's mountains in the backdrop, the students would soon experience a string quartet performance by North Carolina Symphony musicians. They would hear tips from the quartet musicians on what to listen for, and they would learn about the teamwork it takes to perform music together. They would be called upon to take part in a game that demonstrates melody, and to play along using percussion instruments during the final piece of the morning.

But some of the most notable moments that morning happened before a single note was played. As the fifth graders waited for the rest of their classmates to arrive for the Ensembles in the Schools program, many wandered over to the quartet members positioned at the center of the rounded pavilion. They peeked over the shoulders of the musicians warming up, and asked questions about the musical notation they saw on the pages. They told the NCS musicians about their own favorite music, and one student excitedly related the tale of recently being named Little Miss Cherokee, an honor through which she would serve as a representative of the Cherokee tribe that year.

The exchanges between the musicians and students that morning exemplified the cultural exchange that has been key to the immersive music education activities and partnership between the North Carolina Symphony and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI). The educational residency began in the spring of 2016 and has been made possible with the support of the Cherokee Preservation Foundation.

Through the joint project, Cherokee students at every grade level, preschool through high school, have been engaged by NCS education activities during our musicians' frequent visits to the furthest western corner of our state. From the interactive Ensembles in the Schools programs with string quartet and woodwind quintet musicians, to the preschool Music Discovery program — which combines music and literacy through storybook readings and introductions to the instruments of the orchestra — students in Cherokee have had more music education opportunities than ever before. This October, the entire North Carolina Symphony will travel to Cherokee and perform an Education Concert for all students of Cherokee Central Schools (CSS).

"Many of the symphonic instruments lack a familiarity to CSS students," explains Lynn Harlan, Public Relations Officer for EBCI, noting that this is especially the case with string instruments, as there is currently no strings program in the school district. "While our students are successful in academics, it is through the arts that their self-awareness and self-esteem are dramatically enhanced," she adds.

The Symphony's music education offerings simultaneously support the Cherokee Preservation Foundation's objectives of language and cultural preservation. Through the Music Discovery programs, for example, three children's books about music have been translated into the Cherokee language, and students have learned instrument names in both English and Cherokee. (The first book translated even resulted in the creation of a word for "trombone," which previously did not exist in the language!) When Cherokee choral students take the stage with the North Carolina Symphony for the world-premiere performances of *Si Otsedoha (We're Still Here)* by Brooklyn-based composer and Western North Carolina native William Brittelle, they will sing primarily in Cherokee. With fewer than 300 people who speak Cherokee today, the significance of youth engaging with the language and bringing it beyond the Cherokee's Qualla Boundary cannot be overstated.

And what's more, the words that the students will sing reflect their generation's feelings and opinions around their Cherokee identity — words that they all had a hand in creating. In the fall of 2017, in anticipation of this new composition by Brittelle, student leaders organized a forum for open dialogue among their classmates about what it means to be Cherokee. That discussion resulted in poetic statements that, in turn, became the text of Brittelle's work for chorus and orchestra.

"This partnership provides access to a Native American community that has been inaccessible to the musicians of the Symphony — and this exchange affects both communities," says Harlan. "For students, it provides experiential opportunities. For the musicians, it engages them in cultural exchange from the viewpoint of Cherokee children."

It is an honor for NCS to play a part, literally, in making these young people's voices heard. Britelle eloquently sums up the sentiment that many from the Symphony have shared: "Often, it is the vantage point of those most vulnerable and most persecuted that teaches us the most about the world and about ourselves. It is to our great benefit that we hear and see the Cherokee for who they are."

The final song of *Si Otsedoha* refers to a glass wall that stands between two cultures. The hope of both the Symphony and EBCI is that music has — and will continue to — break down that glass wall, transforming each community through understanding and fellowship.

Instruments have been introduced in both English and Cherokee language at preschool Music Discovery programs.

Keep up with NCS and the Cherokee Chamber Singers as we tour Western North Carolina, October 16 through 19.
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