

Music Stars

By Tony Pearson

I covered a number of school Christmas concerts last month, to the point where everything started sounding like 'Jingle Bells' (Trivia note: 'Jingle Bells' isn't actually a Christmas-time song; it was written for American Thanksgiving.) But one I attended stood out – not so much for the music, but for the spirit in which it was presented, and in which it was received. This was when the North Hastings High School junior band performed at Centennial Manor. The audience was not large, but it was select. Its members were residents of the Manor, a long-term care facility for seniors. The official description of the physical and mental capacities of the residents is 'mixed,' and this was illustrated by the various ways in which residents arrived in the room where the band set up. A number walked in and took chairs. Others shuffled in with chairs that doubled as walkers. Others came in on wheelchairs, while others were wheeled in on mobile beds. The music room was bright and airy, and the staff was attentive to the residents' needs. Still, you couldn't help feeling what Shakespeare termed 'the calamity of too-long life.' Nineteenth century British poet Matthew Arnold saw that aging wasn't just about physical losses, but also the darkening of mental outlook:

What is it to grow old?
Is it to lose the glory of the form,
Is it to feel our strength decay?
Is it to feel each limb
Grow stiffer, every function less exact,
'Yes, but not this alone.
It is to spend long days
And not once feel that we were ever young

So the visit of a junior high school band provided a reminder that yes, we were all once young. And everyone could remember that just like this group, even though we didn't always hit all the notes in our lives perfectly, we made strong efforts, and for the most part played our parts decently – and it was good. And everyone could remember how good it was. Then the past transformed into the present, and it was very good again, right at the present moment, right in the room. You could feel the emotional temperature rise and spread, as memories flooded back – of holidays enjoyed, and other times for celebration. Band teacher Diane Winmill, who is a dynamo at performances, eventually had the crowd moving to a distinctly non-Christmas number, 'Rock around the clock.' Even those in wheelchairs moved to the beat. Music is a language that can be shared across the generations, as Irish poet William Butler Yeats wrote:

An aged man is but a tattered coat upon a stick,
Unless soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress.

So congratulations are due to North Hastings High School for reaching out into the community by taking its show on the road this year – to elementary schools, to day care, and especially to the Manor and other seniors' residences.

They crossed the generation gap to bring the warmth of live music to the hearts of those who otherwise might feel cold and somewhat forgotten.

I don't care how well produced an album might be, how many special effects are added, or how dazzling the lights flash in a TV studio.

To be in the room where the music is made, to watch it being appreciated in a group, remains magical.

It's the difference between a movie or television show, and live theatre. You are there, in the moment, watching the show come alive as it is made.

It is said that ?music is like moonlight in the dark of night?
Those who provide it, especially where it's most needed, are then truly stars.