



Hit song by Taio Cruz is a winner for Anoka school orchestra

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Special to the Star Tribune
September 9, 2014 - 1:08 PM

Just before summer break, the advanced orchestra students at Anoka Middle School for the Arts tackled “Dynamite,” the hit song by Taio Cruz. It turned out to be a hit for them, too.

The orchestra won the \$1,000 grand prize in Schmitt Music’s 2014 Play and Win contest, in the ensemble category. That category drew 15 video submissions and more than 1,000 people voted on their favorites via Facebook, said Doug Schmitt of Schmitt Music.

Of the 80-member middle school orchestra, Schmitt said, “The fact that there were lots of students involved and that they were playing outside of their comfort zone probably helped get them more votes.” Schmitt Music likes to see that level of participation, he said.

The grant enables the school to buy much-needed supplies, such as mutes, rosin, tuning forks and sheet music, said orchestra teacher Jesse Peterson.

Also, it’s nice to have a gift card “without so many strings attached — pun intended,” he said.

The achievement is motivating for students. “This exposure has really kicked off a positive attitude for us,” Peterson said.

It’s something that he hopes to build on this year. The contest fosters a “friendly competitive spirit. I want us to get out and see what we’re capable of doing in the future when those opportunities arrive,” he said. .

Peterson, who plays with the Laurels String Quartet, which played with Jeremy Messersmith on “The Late Show with David Letterman” on Aug. 20, said the orchestra usually focuses on classical music, “but we also like to look at alternative styles.” The catchy “Dynamite” is a good example of that. “They get such a kick out of playing the same songs they’re hearing on the radio,” Peterson said.

The students gave it their all. In the video, Peterson said, you can see how the drummer “got them into the groove. You can see the violins around him dancing almost the whole time.”

He credits former orchestra teacher Julie Schmidt, who retired in June after 33 years in the district, for drawing out such a high level of performance from the young players. Schmidt, who continues to give private lessons, said it was rewarding to see the orchestra classes “figure out how to work together and to do well enough to win the contest.”

It was a welcome challenge, as “the kids all love that song,” she said. Schmidt picked it out after realizing that some students had played it at a school music camp.

The melody was easy, but “there was a lot of syncopation in the rhythm. It was tricky in some places.” Students also had to move to the music, “not just stand there and play like robots,” she said.

With practice, those things got easier, and by the time two orchestra classes came together to record their submission, it took only three takes to get a smooth run-through, she said.

She’s proud of the results. “It was a good orchestra and great kids. I was happy to work with them.”



Led by teacher Julie Schmidt, orchestra students at Anoka Middle School for the Arts worked on their production of “Dynamite” shortly before the end of the last school year.

Anoka Middle School for the Arts,

Sophia Collins, an eighth-grader who plays the violin, said, "It was really cool to work on songs you know and listen to during your free time. I like the upbeat tempo of it. It's really fun," she said.

Collins found it tough to play and dance at the same time. "I'm used to sitting still and playing," but it was a good learning experience, she said.

In the end, "It sounded really good. It was probably one of our best performances. I'm glad it got put on YouTube so anyone in the world can see it," Collins said.

Collins, who also participates in the school's fiddle club and is taking up the mandolin this year, said the experience "definitely encouraged me to keep trying and play hard."

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