

Cuban band spices up high school classes

BY SARAH O'DONNELL, EDMONTON JOURNAL DECEMBER 1, 2009



Music teacher Darwin Krips, right, conducts a music class as Bomba band member Aldo Aguirre, left, plays his violin at Sturgeon Composite High School in Namao on Monday.

Photograph by: Photo By Larry Wong, The Journal, Edmonton Journal

Syncopated Latin rhythms and short, articulated musical phrases bounced off the walls Monday at Sturgeon Composite High School's band room.

Easy to dance to? Yes.

Typical concert fare for the school's instrumental and choral students? Absolutely not.

But what else are you going to play when influential Cuban jazz musician Oscar Valdes, his musical director Livan Morejon and six members of the popular local Latin-jazz group Bomba are at the front of your classroom, rehearsing for a sold-out concert tonight at Fort Saskatchewan's Dow Centennial Centre.

The event is the grand finale of a special weeklong, school-wide look into Cuban music and culture with Bomba and the two Cuban guests.

For choir and band kids, it has been a chance to expand their musical boundaries and experience a unique opportunity to perform live with Valdes, a founding member of the Grammy-winning Cuban group Irakere.

"It is an honour," Grade 12 percussionist Amanda Torok said after she spent the morning with Valdes

working to master the foot-tapping rhythms on instruments such as the bongos.

"You don't get to see this every day," she said. "The rhythms are pretty straightforward, but you have to feel the music more to understand it. It's not just counting."

Bomba has performed at Sturgeon Composite for the past four years, and in recent years devoted a few hours to working with music and Spanish students.

What made this year different-- in addition to the visit from Valdes and Morejon--is the fact that the partnership crossed into the rest of the school.

"Bomba went into any classroom where we could find a place for them," said Spanish teacher Shelley Speer, who co-ordinated the band's visit along with music teacher Darwin Krips.

"We did Cuban cooking. They went to construction class and built drums," Speer said.

"They were in social studies classes all Thursday talking about history and culture, what it means to be an immigrant. We did salsa lessons."

The visit was funded in part with a grant from the Alberta Foundation for the Arts.

Bomba percussionist and band leader Mario Allende said the musicians were particularly moved in one class where they taught a deaf student drumming.

"That was Day 1, so right from Day 1 I knew we had something special," Allende said.

Just because the week was special does not mean it was easy.

With the two visiting musicians speaking mainly Spanish and the Sturgeon Composite students speaking English primarily, there was a need for plenty of translation.

"Everybody is learning in different ways," Allende said.

"There's a lot of translating I'm doing, but there's a lot of teaching directly from the guys to the kids that transcends language issues. A lot of the rhythms, a guy like Oscar will just sing it until they get it. There's these different ways to learn."

For Darwin Krips, the music teacher, that language barrier meant the week entailed a lot of singing back and forth with Morejon, who was acting as band leader for the professional musicians as they worked to pin down final versions of the songs.

"The best thing the students are getting out of this is there's a whole world of music outside this door of my room that they have yet to experience and to know," Krips said.

"When they realize how big that world is, it makes them more serious."

Valdes said through a translator that he was touched to see and hear the Canadian students perform his songs from his discography.

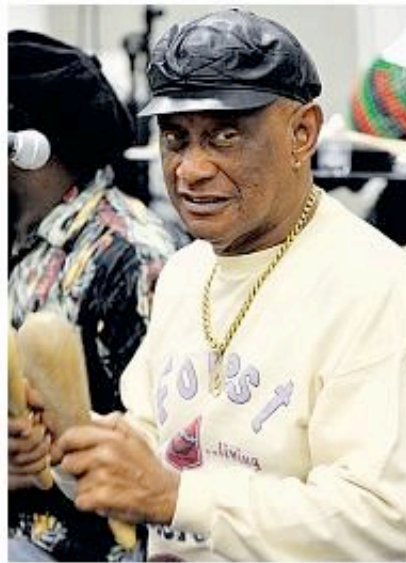
His advice to them on concert night as they all get ready to play together: Stay relaxed, just like they've been all week.

sodonnell@thejournal.canwest.com

© Copyright (c) The Edmonton Journal

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)



Cuban musician Oscar Valdes keeps the beat.

Photograph by: Photo By Larry Wong, The Journal, Edmonton Journal

