

Viva! bows to its own beat

Violas and violins never sounded this fun

Chris Simnett, **Neighbours**, Thursday, March 08, 2007

When one thinks of teenagers and music, the mind can't help but wander into the realm of rap, hip-hop and paint-by-numbers pop-punk.

But the four teenaged members of Viva! (the group's fifth member, Matthew Schnitzler is 12) bring a certain vibe to the viola and violin.

Viva! are a Calgary ensemble consisting of violinists Schnitzler and Jeffrey Komar, violists Kent Fawcett and Stewart Evans (who also plays violin) and violist, flautist and maracas shaker Thomas Komar.

Steve Komar, Thomas and Jeffrey's father is the accompanist while Carmen Wise is the artistic director.

The group, which has been together for the past three years, recorded its debut CD in December at Canada Music Centre, and are poised to step out in the wide world of Latin, classical and popular music.

"This year is our breakout year," says Wise, who coaches the group using the Suzuki method.

"After years of playing together, this year we kind of got our act together."

Viva! play all kinds of music, from tangos to rhumbas to Russian folk songs, but it's the latin beats that really get them going.

Just like their outfits, black shirts and pants set off by bright, primary colour ties, their music pops with vibrancy, fun and light.

"It (Latin music) is not really appreciated in Canada," said Jeffrey, at 16 the senior member of the group and its primary soloist.

"It's very virtuosic compared to other contemporary music."

Wise traces her family tree to South America, so the Latin slant was an obvious way to go when she put the group together.

Another reason was the uniqueness it gave Viva!

"This is a different one," she says. "Most other groups like this play more orchestral stuff, or they are fiddlers."

The uniqueness is something Thomas Komar holds dear.

The 13-year-old began playing the viola because none of his friends did.

"I enjoy doing things that no one else does," says Komar, who is also in archery for the same reason.

Viva! made its stage debut at the 2006 Kiwanis Music Festival, playing on the Jubilee Auditorium stage.

Where do you go from there?

"One of our goals is to be on TV," says Wise with a chuckle.

"It would be nice to be on Breakfast Television. Another of our goals is it would be nice to be a front band for a big event."

Already the group has played at the String Festival and at the Calgary Farmer's Market.

They even set up near the end of the Calgary Marathon course and received some warm applause from the tired runners as they loped past.

All five musicians learned their craft through the Suzuki method, a style of teaching that stresses learning by ear and performing.

As a result, the group doesn't perform behind music stands and is able to move around a bit and is working on putting on a bit of a choreographed show.

"The Suzuki method encourages playing in public," says Wise. "These boys never have stage fright."

That's evident when you see one of them step in front of the group to take a solo.

"It's a way for me to express myself and get out there and play," said Fawcett.

The group's music consists of many tried and true melodies, such as Andrew Lloyd Webber's Phantom of the Opera and Greensleeves, but the arrangements are all original.

Wise and the boys come up with their own takes on each piece.

They also play tunes, such as Dark Eyes, a Russian gypsy song, that aren't in the mainstream.

"We try to pick pieces we haven't played before or people haven't heard that much," said Jeffrey.

The Suzuki method is near and dear to Wise, and she uses Viva! and other groups underneath her Heartstrings Studio umbrella to raise money for the Latin Suzuki Scholarship Fund.

In fact, \$5 from the sale of each \$10 CD goes straight into the fund, which helps teachers and students in South and Central America continue with their musical studies.

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