

Students tune in to Gamelan music

Teacher introduces Indonesian sounds to fourth-graders

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When the fourth-graders first played the instruments, noise rang out, but after an hour with instructor Joko Sutrisno, music filled the room.

Two classes from Jefferson Elementary School received a special introduction to Gamelan music at St. Cloud State University. Gamelan is an Indonesian instrument ensemble that includes xylophones, gongs and drums.

The full set of Gamelan instruments at St. Cloud State is on loan from the Schubert Club in St. Paul. Stephen Fuller, a music professor and Gamelan program director at the university, wanted elementary students to experience Gamelan, so he set up special sessions with a few schools in the area.

Sutrisno, a longtime player and Gamelan teacher, took the Jefferson students through a quick lesson last week.

An array of instruments foreign to the children awaited them when they entered the room at St. Cloud State. There



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Students Souysane Sithamat (left) and Hannah Deem concentrated on playing their notes in the Gamelan ensemble.

“Do we want to spend the next 50 minutes like that,” Sutrisno asked.

“No,” they said.

Good, he said, and he pointed to the blackboard where he showed them how they should play the different instruments.

He pointed and said “tuk, pul, tuk, nong,” and had the students repeat those words with him.

“I want you to memorize the structure,” he said.

The students struggled.

Gombos was trying to play an instrument called the Bonang.

“It was hard. You had to really think. You had to watch the board and watch so you don’t hit the wrong part,” Gombos said.

The excitement students had for the instruments pleased Jefferson teachers who wanted to expose them to music from a different culture.

“For me, music is such a wonderful way to try to make children respectful and curious of the world they live in,” said Jane Oxtan, a teacher at Jefferson.

If the students hadn’t gotten a chance to try the instruments, they might just think of them as strange and foreign, she said. By playing the instruments, students will be more open to music from other cultures, Oxtan said.

sarons (metallophones with six or seven bronze keys lying over a wooden trough resonator); a slentham (metallophones with bamboo resonators); bonang (a set of small horizontally suspended gongs); a gambang (a wooden

xylophone) and many others.

All of the instruments are ornately decorated and painted red, blue and bronze.

The students sat anxiously at the instruments, tempted to play before Sutrisno instructed them.



Instructor Joko Sutrisno demonstrated the sounds and rhythm of Gamelan.

“If you can say it, you can play it,” Sutrisno told them. “Gamelan is an oral music.”

He demonstrated playing one of the Kendangs while making sounds with his voice.

“It’s important to play and say at the same time,” he told the 25 students. “Not just bong, bong, bong, bong.”

They needed to pay attention to play. The children promised Sutrisno they would.

He explained that he has played Gamelan for 27 years and he still must concentrate.

Finally, the moment the students had been waiting for came.

“Please pick up your mallets,” he said.

He told students to use their wrists to play the instruments.

“You need to strike it in the middle and don’t strike it too loud or too soft — just medium,” Sutrisno said.

“I’ll give you five seconds to explore,” Sutrisno said.

“Wow,” a few students shouted and the class unleashed their



Taylor Gombos waited for his cue.

energy onto the instruments.

The sound that arose could best be described as clangs and bangs — headache-making material.

“It was kind of blah,” 8-year-old Taylor Gombos said.

His classmates agreed. “Too noisy,” they said.

“It was cool to learn a different instrument,” said Gombos, who enjoys playing piano.

The music lover admitted it was hard to reach all the parts of the instrument. “You had to stretch both of your arms to get to the spots,” he said.

Soon, the class took a second chance at playing and then a third and a fourth and again and again.

“It’s beginning to sound beautiful,” Sutrisno said.

And it was.

It sounded good to Gombos.

“I thought everybody had a place. The gong was one big boom, but a very cool instrument too,” Gambos said.

Gambos understood that all the instruments together created the Gamelan music.

“I think with a lot of instruments it feels better and it makes the songs more exciting,” Gambos said.

Sutrisno enjoys introducing students to Gamelan.

“This experience will stay with them a long time,” he said.