

St. Max students hit a high note with burgeoning music program

Students at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School will soon add their first music recognition to their sports-laden trophy case.

The choir, led by teacher Jennifer Doria, took third in CBC's Canadian Music Class Challenge for their rendition of "Life Is" by Arkells.

The Canadian Music Class Challenge is a CBC program designed to shine a light on music education from coast to coast. Hundreds of classes took part in this year's competition, which challenged each participating team to perform their best version of a Canadian song with a cash prize awarded to the winners to help expand student band and music programs.

The musical students at St. Max came third in the Junior Vocal category, which covers students in Grades 7 to 10, a remarkable feat considering some of the challenges the local high school has experienced getting their music programs off the ground.

"It is my first year at St. Max and I was looking for a way to increase student engagement with music because our music program is teeny-tiny," says Doria. "We created a small choir, put a shout-out to the student body to see if anybody was interested in singing. As soon as I had a handful of singers, we said we needed goals, we needed immediate interest and engagement, so this has been one of our little projects.

"I'm over-the-moon proud of these students. They really embody the growth mindset we're always talking about in music education. In listening to the song selections [for the competition], I kept in mind one boy who came to that very first choir meeting that I held and when he walked into the room, he was like, 'Oh my goodness, Miss, I have been waiting my whole high school career for this. Are we really going to have a choir?'" As soon as I knew I had a male voice that was interested in doing some leads, as soon as I found out he could also play guitar, I knew "Life Is" had to be the song because it translated so well [and] just fit. The message is that paradox of life: it's hard sometimes, but it's also the idea of community and connection."

Building the school's music program to where it should be will be an ongoing uphill climb, says Doria, but "we're going to do it together."

Over her 20-year teaching career, Doria says she often sees music as being taken for granted simply because it is everywhere. "It is there to wake us up in the morning, it is there on our drive to work or wherever we're going, it's in the students' earbuds in hallways at schools, it's there when we're happy, it's there when we're sad and we need a lift up?" but it's always something that needs to be advocated for in education.

Doria has been relying on community donations to build up the school's music program. In addition to a sizable donation from the Aurora Rotary Club to help the school purchase some of the more expensive brass instruments, she frequently looks for listings on Facebook Marketplace and other online platforms for instruments she herself can clean, fix, or otherwise bring into good working order.

"Perhaps it's because school budgets are getting smaller and we're always having to do more with less? let's face it, to run an instrumental music program can be costly," says Doria emphasis placed on athletics over some arts program. "I know we talk about budgets reflecting engagement and I think with music, one thing we have to realize is [outside of students who take music in extra-curriculars] there is also student engagement in what music brings to the school."

To illustrate her point, she cites a recent Music Ministry at the school.

"I can't tell you how many students and staff afterwards commented about how engaged they felt and how they have never felt so engaged at a mass before, partly due to the music that was making the scripture and the celebration of advent that much more meaningful," she says.

?We are creating student engagement as participants and listeners of music, consumers of music, not just those who are creating the music. From that aspect, I think it starts with the listeners and then some of those listeners will be brave enough to realize that, yes, they can take a chance, yes, they can get out of their comfort zones, as students who are already showing up are. We had some talks and even some tearful moments where students didn't feel confident, or they were afraid to perform in front of their peers because they didn't think they were good enough. We had to talk to these students a lot about changing that story?to yes, you can sing, yes, you're good enough. We work together and we build.?

If you are interested in helping St. Maximilian Kolbe CHS build their music program, reach out to Jennifer Doria at jennifer.doria@ycdsb.ca.

By Brock Weir