

Black Violin strikes a chord with fourth graders

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With influences ranging from Shostakovich and Bach to Nas and Jay-Z, stereotype-smashing Black Violin breaks the rules, blending classical, hip-hop, rock, R&B, and bluegrass to create a sound they call "classical boom."

Black Violin is an American hip hop duo from Fort Lauderdale, composed of classically trained violist and violinist Wil B. and Kev Marcus who combine their classical training and hip-hop influences to create a distinctive multi-genre sound.

They've shared stages with top names including Kayne West and Aerosmith and have collaborated with Wyclef Jean and Alicia Keys, among others.

Recently they performed virtually for students at Oak Ridge Elementary School as part of Opening Nights at Florida State University's ON in Class educational offerings, sponsored by Centennial Bank.

In this time of COVID, all educators are struggling to keep kids safe while providing them with enriching experi-



Oak Ridge music teacher Kelsey Short and her fourth graders prepare for the Black Violin concert. SPECIAL TO THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

ences to supplement their classroom work. Field trips to concert halls and auditoriums are off the table for now, but

many are turning to the virtual world including Black Violin. They place a heavy emphasis on educational outreach, and

they've recently entered the student virtual space with an all-new, high-energy performance.

Recorded at the Broward Center for the Performing Arts, this engaging, high-definition multi-camera video covers themes of perseverance, exploration, and unity with songs.

Embedded in the performance is a message for students and educators about challenging stereotypes and status quo conventions, and that pathways to success require commitment, practice, and unwavering dedication.

Calla MacNamara, education and engagement manager with Opening Nights said "Virtual concerts are proving to be wonderful. We would have to fill Ruby Diamond Concert Hall up more than 28 times to fit in the more than 34,000 Leon County School students. However, with these virtual experiences, we can instantly accommodate any student who wishes to participate."

The accessibility of the Black Violin virtual experience is a major perk as Oak Ridge music teacher Kelsey Short

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points out. “When you look at classical music, historically, it’s predominantly white. It’s also elitist. If you had money, you got to experience music. To me, it’s important to make sure music is approachable from all sides.”

The minority enrollment at Oak Ridge is more than 90% and Short is committed to providing her students with learning opportunities that reflect their own experience as well as the experiences of others.

“I talk with my students a lot about the importance of representation and being able to see people who look like them in music and in positions of power,” Short said. “There have been some symphonies, up until just a few years ago, that only allowed white males.”

“It’s important to make them aware and educate them on the history so we can recognize how to move forward and change that. Accepting that our past is not the easiest thing to talk about, we can make changes for the future. Getting to teach this generation is going to be very important for our future.”

Part of that future includes Oak Ridge fourth grader Elijah Young. He’s been studying the violin with Leon County Schools strings teacher, Zlatina Staykova and he was especially impressed with Black Violin’s ability to combine different styles to make a unique sound. “They did classical and hip-hop in one song. They mix the two together,” he explained.

Short also enjoyed that aspect of the performance and said “I love that they took Mozart 40 and the Brandenburg and changed them into hip-hop remixes. That’s especially cool for the kids because they get to see that music doesn’t have to be one way. Just because it was that way before, it can be changed into your own style.”

Elijah was moved by Black Violin’s overarching message and shared, “they want others to understand that there is no color to playing music. Anyone can play the violin, Blacks or whites, and all the other in-



Oak Ridge students get on their feet and clap along with the performance. CALLA MACNAMARA

struments too. They want people to know that anything is possible. You don’t have to give up on your dreams just because of the race you are.”

Short also tries to impart that message to her students and is pleased that the Black Violin virtual performance has served as a catalyst for deeper conversations about music, race, representation, diversity, equity, and inclusion. “Even my kindergarteners are getting into it,” she said. “I’ve shown the performance to every class. It’s created more discussions so that’s awesome.”

Short admits that talking about such sensitive issues with youngsters can be difficult.

“It’s not without its challenges because I don’t want to say the wrong thing. I want to understand as much as I can and I’m constantly educating myself on what work I still have to do,” Short said. “Everybody with white privilege has work to do because we’ve never experienced that kind of discrimination. The arts are more important now than ever because they are what really unify us. No matter the color of our skin, no matter the language we speak, we can always communicate through the arts.”

This article is part of COCA’s Creativity Persists collection and highlights how area educators are continuing to teach and inspire during the COVID-19 pandemic. Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).