

The Journal

Composer's work focuses on New Ulm stories

Concerto presented at State Street Theater Saturday



Staff photo by Connor Cummiskey Composer Peter Michael von der Nahmer (right) and Accompanist Laura Stelljes played music from one side of the stage during Musical Tales Concerto.

NEW ULM — The culmination of a summer spent interviewing senior citizens, working with teenagers and getting to know New Ulm was realized Saturday evening.

Resident Composer Peter Michael von der Nahmer spent much of this summer at The Grand crafting a unique show — *“Musical Tales Concerto: Growing Young/Growing Wise.”*

“I think with the emotion in all of these pieces, the fact that it was such a short time to put it together adds to that adrenaline and there was no time to get tired of any of these pieces because they are still so fresh in our minds,” Director Michael Koester said. *“All of the actors and all of the musicians (poured) their hearts out with that adrenaline because it is so fresh for them. I think that makes a very unique display.”*

The show had three unique acts. For the most part there was no overall story to follow, instead it was episodic, with little connecting the various scenes and songs together.

The first act, titled *“Growing Young,”* featured the stories of four senior citizens who shared memories of their youth with von der Nahmer.

Doris Groebner, Dolores Kahle, Jeanie Gareis and Vernon Stadick all were portrayed onstage interviewing von der Nahmer, who was played by Koester.

In their interviews they talked about life growing up in the early 20 century. At one point, Groebner observes that her grandparents worked significantly harder than her to make ends meet and how each generation seems to have life a little easier.

Life without electricity, love, farming and drinking German beer were all topics discussed by the seniors.

Gareis, whose character spoke about the importance of music in her life, showed up onstage herself to sing *“You are my Sunshine”* while playing guitar.

At the end of the act, all four seniors were ushered onto the stage to roaring applause.

The second act "*Growing Wise*" was a series of stories written by New Ulm locals. They varied from a song, "*Lucille*" about Author Molly Hennig's grandmother fleeing home to go to what was at the time Dr. Martin Luther College to a story by Megan Benage called "*Steven and the Bee*" about a man who invents a mechanical bee to replace dwindling populations before realizing his hubris at attempting to reinvent something that already occurs in nature.

The final act was the only one with a clear, overarching story, "*The Wind and the Sweet German Boy*."

The story, written by von der Nahmer's friend Marianna Mott Newirth, tells the story of the relationship between a personified wind and a fictionalized version of von der Nahmer referred to as the Sweet German Boy.

The Wind acts like an older sister to the boy as he grows up and watches him as he becomes distanced from the world, constantly asking why things happen to him.

The story was told previously at a practice run of Musical Tales Concerto and is sprinkled with songs, spoken word and a dance number.

Much of the story had Anita Prestidge in a purple dress and a large, purple hat narrating. Aiden Hendrickson, James Bergstad and Koester, acted out the actions of the young boy, older boy and man respectively. The wind was portrayed by Cait Eisner.

This project started as von der Nahmer's exploration of German-American heritage and what that means.

His search kept prompting him with New Ulm. In 2015 he applied for the McKnight Visiting Composer Residency after speaking with Professor Grace Hennig and Mayor Robert Beussman.

He got the grant and has spent the summer in two nonconsecutive periods at The Grand Center for Arts and Culture.

He wanted to show the value of the stories of senior citizens and the importance of every member of a community.

“The entire, for me at least, the entire meaning of the show is to show that everybody has to tell stories and we need to learn from each of them,” von der Nahmer said.

Over time, the seniors became like grandparents to von der Nahmer, whose own grandparents passed away before he could speak with them about their early lives.

Interviews with senior citizens and collaboration with local artists and teenagers quickly birthed the show.

“Here is where I can look back through the time of my own family — my forefathers who are both from America as well as Germany — and know I have arrived at a place where I belong, a place that truly feels like home,” von der Nahmer wrote in the program. *“I am deeply moved by each of you and grateful for everything you have taught and shared with me.”*

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