

December 7, 2009

Button the lips, face the music

I went to an accordion concert Saturday, sublimely confident I could squeeze a column out of that. After all, can there be an odder instrument than a music box apparently made from random parts? To my untrained eye, there's a keyboard from a kid's piano on one side, a bunch of buttons on the other, a bellows billowing between both.

Oh, and enough straps for a bondage joke that I won't do here.

My sarcastic side was eagerly awaiting a set list of polkas, sea chanteys and more polkas. Or maybe that was my sadistic side.

And just to be sure everything went whimsically, I brought along the equivalent of column insurance.

"Get in the car," I commanded my young sons. "We're going to hear the Westmont Philharmonia Accordion Orchestra!" Well, the boys raced out of the house -- but mostly because it was snowing. I began interviewing them as we drove to the show at the Camden County Library in Haddon Township.

So, guys, where do you think the accordion comes from?

"Czechoslovakia," guessed Jake, who's 12 and highly cultured like his mom.

"Alabama?" twanged Luke, who's 8 and more like some other parent.

I also pondered how the Philharmonia might bill the show.

Pandemonia! came to mind, as did Zydeco-to-go.

In fact, the program proclaimed "Mufflermania" -- but that's the Westmont firm that donated printing costs for the group's "annual winter concert."

At last, the musicians -- eight accordionists, a flutist and a percussionist -- launched into their first song.

And all the air went out of my little composition.

The music was -- what's the word? -- beautiful.

Luke nestled into my lap. Jake leaned forward, almost reverently.

And oh, how I suffered -- alone in an audience of several dozen smiling faces -- as the accordions sighed and swirled, moaned and wailed. There's nothing funny here, I realized in horror as the musicians glided through a mix of operatic and boogie-woogie selections.

The Philharmonia turns out to be -- to me, at least -- an overlooked institution now entering its 50th year. It was co-founded by Saturday's conductor, Stanley Darrow, who since 1952 has run the Acme Accordion School in Westmont.

OK, so there's a Wile E. Coyote joke -- but at this point, how dare I crack it?

"The accordion is the national instrument of many countries and for ethnic groups, it's one of the main

instruments," says Joanna Darrow, Stanley's wife and a soloist at the show. She cites the impact of the instrument, invented by a German in the 1820s, among groups as diverse as the Italians, the Argentines and the Mummies.

And performers can feel a close relationship with the instrument, at least according to Darrow.

"It breathes," she says, explaining how air passes through a dozen "giant harmonicas" inside the instrument. "It is a part of you, an extension of your body."

Now needing help desperately, I turn to my older son.

"Give me a funny line, Jake," I beg him.

"I wouldn't be funny," he corrects me, showing another way he takes after his mother. "Just give them publicity. They deserve it."

Jim Walsh's column runs Mondays. He can be reached at (856) 486-2646 or jwalsh@courierpostonline.com

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