Musician scores beyond the notes

David Wallace improvises on the traditional visiting artist formula.

SUE WHITE
■ THE SAGINAW NEWS

It wasn't your standard piece of sheet music.

For starters, the French overture score David Wallace brought to Mosaica Academy of Saginaw was oversized. And, after fifth-grader Dominique Trouse and fourth-grader Chrystalle Lee had given it some "ornamentation," it challenged Wallace to musically interpret loops, zig-zags and exploding stars.

But the violist, in Saginaw as part of the Dow Corning Visiting Artist Residency program, rose to the challenge, delivering a performance that melded the youngsters' improvisations with the classical theme.

In fact, the work may show up in Thursday's performance at St. Shephen Church, 1310 Malzahn. Tickets to the 7 p.m. show are $5.

"It's pretty radical," Wallace said of his interactive style. "I like getting kids involved, in performing and in making things up.

"They're solving the same problems composers faced. Basically, in order for kids to understand, appreciate and enjoy music, they need to have a personal experience with it."

Wallace's school program, presented for the past two weeks to fourth- and fifth-graders throughout Saginaw County, covered three centuries of music, from Baroque through American folk and jazz.

Mosaica's audience was primed, wildly applauding the musician's warm-up scales. When Wallace asked about the difference between a violin and a viola — size — the students took it a step further, talking about the deeper tone of the viola.

Within minutes, Wallace had them performing. Half of the room set up a rhythm by clapping, the others stomped their feet.
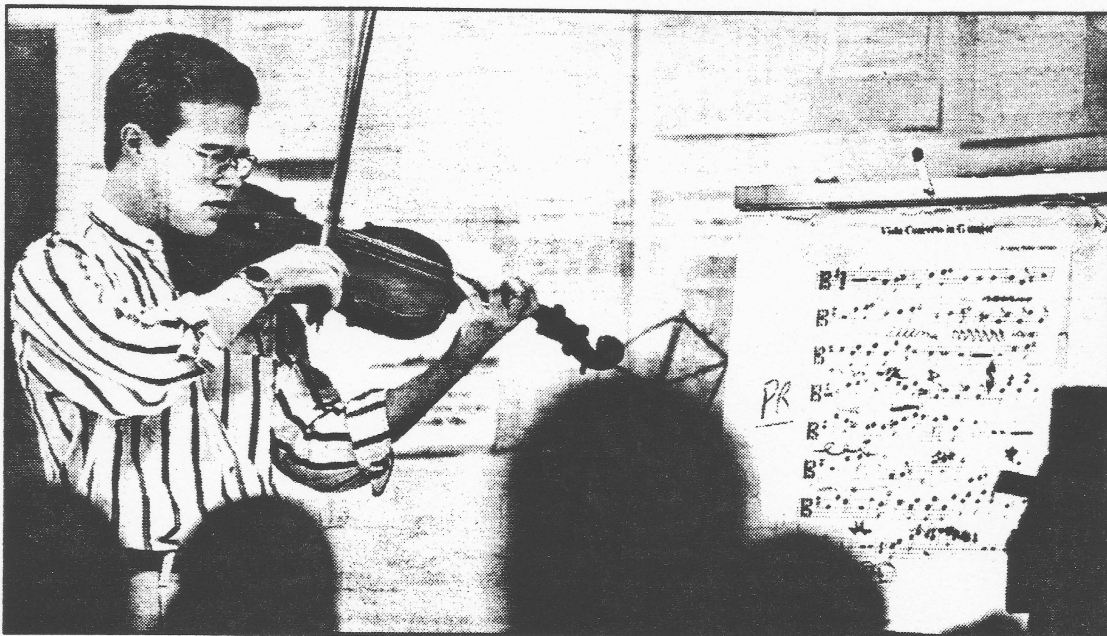
Out came the fruits and vegetables, a banana, an eggplant, a symphony of maracas rattling through the gymnasium.

"What's a good title?" Wallace asked as he drew the impromptu jam to close.

"We Will Rock You," they answered.

"It's already taken," he said, leading the classes to a safer "Our Music," written "By Us."

A 1720 prelude, an improvisation in itself, took on a sinister tone with its embellishments — "It's like the Titanic," called out the students, labeling the new composition "scary" and "more interesting."

The originals are good, Wallace explained, comparing them to a piece of cake, "but improvisation makes it more like a cake with icing."

Wallace then performed Aaron Copland's "Hoedown," a title that brought giggles, and George Gershwin's "Summertime."

"Did you hear what we did?" Wallace said afterwards, reacting to the change in rhythm the students brought to the classic. "You're the first school to change the clapping, and I had to change to keep up with you.
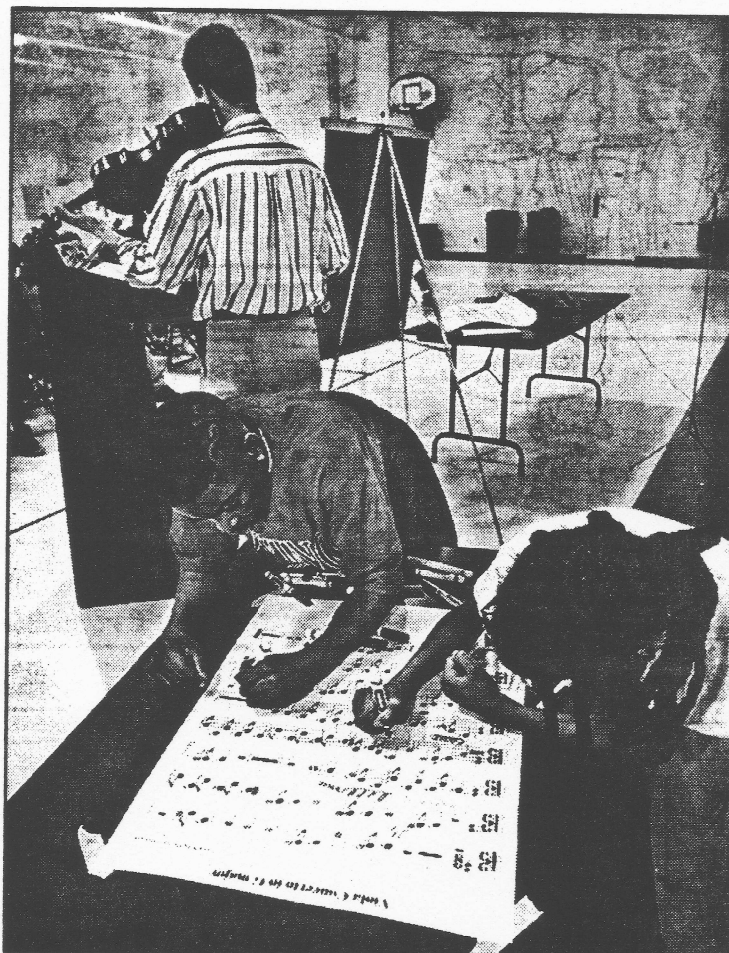
"We improvised together — that was fun."

Drawing still another group of students to the front, he gave them 10 seconds to come up with something "cool."

"Go nuts," he told them. "Let's have fun."

Finally, it was time for the finale, and with viola in hand, Wallace educated his young fans in still another element of performance, knowing when to sit still and listen quietly.

Wallace's boyish looks belie his credentials. A doctoral candidate at the Juilliard School, he is an adviser for Educational Outreach Programs and assistant viola faculty. He has performed with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center — he's a teaching artists for the Lincoln Center Institute as well as the New York Philharmonic — and on several independent movie and off-Broadway theatrical soundtracks.

Wallace first became interested in a violin his father had bought in college for $8, and, at age 3, he got his own for Christmas.

At 7, he took up the piano, determined to learn "The Entertainer" from "The Sting," and three years later, he began studying the violin.

"Another musician told me to never play the same way once," Wallace said, chuckling. "I like that." ■

Violist David Wallace turns his performances into an interactive experience.

BERNIE ENG/THE SAGINAW NEWS

Fifth-grader Dominique Trouse and fourth-grader Chrystalle Lee embellish a French overture at the Mosaica Academy of Saginaw.

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