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Chickasaw students participate in groundbreaking recording



Amanda Shackleford, left, works with Alan Bise of Thunderbird Records during a recording session of 11 Chickasaw students' compositions by ETHEL, a string quartet based in New York. The recording session was conducted Jan. 22-24 at Oklahoma City University. The CD is expected to be released this year and distributed worldwide.

ADA, Okla. – While Johnathan Bomboy spent several years in the school band and has a natural talent for music – he plays 11 instruments, including guitar – he couldn't read music. But that changed during the Chickasaw Summer Arts Academy as Jerod Tate was explaining time signatures and music notation.

"I just suddenly had this eureka moment," Bomboy said. "I just stood up in the class room when he was teaching that and said 'I get it!' I don't know what it was, but that light bulb just clicked and it was a fairly bright light bulb," he added. Since that time, he has composed several works for string quartet, two of which were recorded during a recent history-making project Jan. 22-24 at Oklahoma City University. Bomboy is one of 11 CSAA student composers who acted as co-producers as their music was recorded by America's premier postclassical string quartet ETHEL.

Results of the project will be featured on the first album release in history with only works by American Indian student composers. The completed album is set for a summer 2010 release by Thunderbird Records.

"We are extremely pleased to be part of this innovative project," said Chickasaw Nation Governor Bill Anoatubby. "Our goal is to inspire these students to pursue their dreams, by giving them a glimpse into a world of possibilities and experiences. The students are remarkable and they should be very proud of what they have accomplished."

Formed in 1998, ETHEL is known for their adventurous and improvisational take on classical music. They have brought several workshops, tours, and performances to hundreds of American Indian students over the ensemble's 11-year history. Juilliard-trained performers in the group include Cornelius "Neil" Duffalo, violin; Ralph Farris, viola; Dorothy Lawson, cello; and Mary Rowell, violin. "It's just fascinating to be playing all this new music written by young people," said Duffalo. "It's such a joy to see the high level of achievement here and the sophistication of music from high school students."

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The Chickasaw Nation's Composer in Residence Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate led the composition group at CSAA and oversaw the album recording. Ralph Farris, who play viola for ETHEL, said that he knew the students would be "awesome" because he knows Jerod's work. "Jerod is a very special guy," said Farris. "He is building these composers' confidence and their technique. It's astonishing watching him work, the rapport he has with his students is amazing. We knew the students would be the top of the line."

During the sessions, all 11 students spent hours working with Thunderbird records producer Alan Bise participating in all aspects of the album recording from start to finish. Dylan Bennett, a student at Norman North High School, said it was "intimidating" at first to work with such a renowned group of musicians.

While several of the students expressed similar feelings, Bise said they were more than up to the challenge. "I am amazed at how confident these student-composers are," said Bise during a break in the recording session. "They are not shy at all about saying what they want. They are very impressive kids, the compositions are great, but the way they interact with everybody is really surprising and amazing."

"It's rare we get to work with living composers, anyway. I wasn't sure how the students would react to an environment like this, it's a tough environment. They are working with a very professional group from New York, ETHEL quartet and they are handling it unbelievably well." Tate echoed the sentiment. "Every single one of them took this wonderful risk and felt very comfortable," said Tate. "All the kids concurred that their experience with Alan Bise was wonderful. They felt so supported sitting with Alan in the hot seat that it didn't occur to them to be nervous. Once they sat down and started going it just flowed beautifully."

Daniel Bennett, Dylan's father, said the arts academy and the recording project have really helped give Dylan direction. "After CSAA camp he started composition and that became his focus," said Daniel. "Watching it come alive today was amazing. It's a great tool. What a great opportunity to experience the recording process at such a young age."

Tate said many of the parents were really impressed to see a group of professionals treat the students' music so seriously and with so much attention to detail. "I'm sure the parents went home with a new type of respect for their kids," he said.

ETHEL has performed around the globe and collaborated with artists including Bang on a Can, The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the New York Chamber Symphony, CONTINUUM, Sheryl Crow, Roger Daltrey and Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project.

Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate has received numerous commissions and his works have been performed by the National Symphony Orchestra, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Philadelphia Classical Symphony, Minnesota Orchestra, Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra and Colorado Ballet. A 2008 recording of his works performed by the San Francisco Symphony and San Francisco SymphonyChorus, and marks the first time a major American Symphony Orchestra and an American Indian composer have collaborated to record and release orchestral works.