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## Damascus students compose variations on ‘Star Spangled Banner’

### Symphony and students vary the nation’s anthem

by Susan Singer-Bart, Staff Writer  
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Francis Scott Key wrote the words for “The Star Spangled Banner” to the tune of an old English drinking song, “To Anacreon in Heaven.”

With that in mind, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra asked students at Damascus Elementary School to write a variation for the national anthem in honor of the upcoming 200th anniversary of the battle that inspired the song.

Monday morning, three members of the orchestra — Michael Lisicky and Sandra Gerster on oboes and Fei Yie on bassoon — played the students’ compositions.

Groups of fifth-graders had spent several weeks with music teacher Angela Thompson writing variations to convey the mood of the piece.

Key wrote the verses as a poem, “The Defense of Fort McHenry,” while imprisoned aboard a British ship in Baltimore Harbor, watching the British attack on Fort McHenry in 1814, Lisicky told the third- through fifth-graders in the gym.

A 15-star flag, the U.S. flag of the era, hung behind them. Lisicky asked if any students knew which two states were added to the 13 original to make 15. Several students raised their hands; Kentucky was easy, but Vermont was harder.

Francis Scott Key was trying to negotiate an exchange of prisoners when he overheard the British planning the attack, so the British put Key in jail, Ian Culpepper, 10, said after the performance.



Principal Sean McGee said that working with the orchestra on one program a year since 2007 has helped students excel in other areas. They get more from the program that mixes social studies and science with music than by just reading and writing, he said.

“Each time we do it, we find the value in seeing students shine,” McGee said.

Fifth-graders worked in small groups, each taking a few lines of the four verses of the song.

Ian’s group wanted to make their verses sound proud, he said.

“We went from B flat to B major, started soft, nice then stepped up to proud and exciting,” Ian said.

Kaitlin Sennewald, 11, said her group wanted the song to sound proud and strong.

“That’s why we made it loud in the middle,” she said. “My group felt very proud of our verses and really liked how it turned out.”

One variation started with a solo oboe, another with a solo bassoon. Two added students on the snare drum for dramatic effect.

Before the performance, the trio played the variations for the student composers.

Erica Doerler, 10, said she was surprised to hear how well the music turned out.

“They asked us if we wanted any changes,” Erica said. “This is just like how I imagined. It was perfect, I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Erica said she always feels patriotic because she and her twin brother, Andrew, were born on July 4. When she worked on the composition, she thought of her neighbor in the Air Force. Ian said he thought of his neighbor in Afghanistan and that he wants to follow his relatives who served in the military and join the Navy when he is old enough. Kaitlin said she was thinking of her brother, who wants to join the Army.

“This is the first time we have ever done this show like this,” Lisicky said.



Chris Rossi/The Gazette Damascus Elementary School fifth-graders (from left) Hope North, Cecilia Emerson and Rachel Saah sing the “Star Spangled Banner” as part of a program to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the song.

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The Star Spangled Variations program is one of several programs that comprise the orchestra's outreach program in Montgomery County, called BSO on the Go, said Richard Spero, the orchestra's community liaison. In February, they will perform variations written by students at Travilah Elementary School in North Potomac. In May, they will perform variations written by students at Broad Acres Elementary School in Silver Spring.

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