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Bang! Clank! Music to the ears; Symphony's outreach group gets kids hearing music

By Jackie Burrell
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LAFAYETTE - The theater was filled with a happy hubbub of toddler prattle when Eric Thompson suddenly cut loose on the drums. Two more California Symphony percussionists ran from the wings. And a third, arms akimbo and hat flying, shot down the aisle, past the crowd of astonished concertgoers to join the crashing crescendos on stage.

Small children gaped, then grinned. Who knew a symphony concert could involve such syncopated, musical mayhem? Or such enthusiastic hitting of objects?

"We like to hit things --" said Victor Avdienko, as he launched the California Symphony's umpteenth annual Family Concert and Instrument Petting Zoo on Saturday afternoon.

The Acalanes Theater stage erupted in gleeful, rhythmic riffs.

"-- to make music," Avdienko finished, with a mock glare at his overly zealous colleagues, all members of the California Symphony's education outreach troupe, Supercussion.

The foursome, Thompson, Avdienko, Tim Dent and Ward Spangler, routinely visit Bay Area schools to teach children about the joys of marimbas, vibes and snares, and the other 50-plus percussion instruments assembled on-stage Saturday afternoon. Even the, ahem, whoopie cushion.

"That's technically a wind instrument," Avdienko murmured into the microphone Saturday.

Drums from Ghana and gongs from China were displayed with percussive instruments from every other corner of the globe. But it was the percussionists who riveted the crowd with musical explorations that blended rap, rock and Mozart.

Rather than talk about the concept of a theme and variations, the quartet launched a simple "O Susanna" on xylophone, then morphed the frontier tune through hilarious variations with jazz licks, Asian overtones, a driving

rock beat and cartoonlike sound effects. One variation could have been written by Michael Jackson, another by Henry Mancini -- if Inspector Clouseau had ever been to Alabama, let alone with a banjo on his knee.

"The Supercussion group is our star ensemble. They're bigger kids than the kids," Stacey Street, the symphony's executive director, said fondly. "It's a huge production."

By the end of the concert, small hands were reaching for the sky. How old were you when you started? How many instruments do you have? And most of all ... can I play that?

It was the perfect segue to the theater lobby, where Oakland's Best Music had set up an instrument petting zoo, complete with gleaming French horns, glossy violins and statuesque string basses.

Lafayette's Stanley Middle School provided the experts -- student musicians - - to guide preschoolers through the intricacies of flute embouchures and trumpet valves. Eighth-grader K.J. Kroetch helped a preschooler clamber up on a chair, so she could reach an instrument twice her size. The girl's eyes widened as she drew the bow across the bass strings, producing a deep, satisfying thrum.

"It's really cool because everyone gets to come and try everything," Kroetch said.

"It's total cacophony," Street said. "It's an amazing barrage of sounds."