Hidden talent: Band’s out of sight

BY NANCY SMIRL JORGENSEN

Three nights running 450 people pay $10 for a concert they never see. Performances sell out a week before opening night, procrastinators light up the phone with ticket requests, and crowds linger around the display posters.

In the show that is not seen there are five performers: Nick Cesurz (known as N-Zone), Jonathan Gmeinder (G-String), Frank Balistreri (B-Movie), Tom Compton (Special-T) and me (J-Town). Neither the performers on stage nor the audience members in the house know about our names (or the vast disparity in our ages, backgrounds and experiences), but the monikers give our ensemble identity and ownership. I direct The J Crew Band while playing principal keyboard, but band members who know temps or entries also provide cues. We warn each other about measures that need to be quickly transposed or entries that are intricately timed.

While I am the only player who is paid to be a musician, the other four instrumentalists are also professionals in every sense. Given the music a few weeks before final rehearsals, each member prepared to fill a vital role in the ensemble. With only two weeks until opening night, we join forces to rehearse as a group. As we practice, it is clear that each musician did his homework. Frank, an English teacher who grew up listening to opera and Chopin, mans a mean set of guitars. Trading instruments between numbers, his versatile playing features classic rock ‘n’ roll chords, an Indian sitar imitation and elegantly fluid arpeggios.

Tom is a Harvard University student, home on break, aching to exercise his musical genius. Immerging himself in our set of 26 songs, he fashioned brass, woodwind, string and percussion parts that he executes alternately and sometimes simultaneously on a set of three synthesizer keyboards.

Jonathan and Nick are high school students with musical promise and talent. Jonathan plays both bass guitar and keyboard, alternating throughout the show. Nick, in the absence of any written music, listened to and memorized all 26 pieces. He plays drum set with a drive for perfection. Idle rehearsal moments for Nick are spent with his iPod. Knowing he missed a beat or a hit, he quickly references a recording to fix his mistake.

The magic of musicianship is revealed as our group of five gels into an ensemble. Frank and I have collaborated for years in this performance for high school music theater students, but the other musicians vary annually as student musicians graduate and others come to the fore. Frank and I are the perennial learners, eager to teach but also to study, knowing the youngest members of our group often teach us the most.

It is opening night and privileged ticket holders assemble in the theater to enjoy the concert. Audience members have purchased tickets to a musical theater revue, but what most patrons never realize is that there are two performances happening concurrently. While the song and dance on stage is humorous, poignant and powerful, the audience never fully enjoys the simultaneous concert that happens in the pit. To those engrossed in the singers and actors on stage, the instrumental accompaniment is secondary. But for those of us tucked into a corner, upstage right, providing the accompaniment means creating a performance that could stand alone.

With voices streaming through our headphones and a video display of onstage movement, our goal is to provide music for the singers and dancers. But for us the ultimate concert is our own performance and our desire to perfect it. The singing and dancing commands eye and ear, making the accompaniment secondary. This reality is irrelevant to The J Crew Band. After each performance, band members call for a rehearsal of specific numbers or measures that were insecure. If our instrumental performance could not stand alone as a recital in itself, our ensemble is not satisfied.

After three nights, when the performances come to an end, Frank returns to teaching English, Tom focuses on his return to college, Nick and Jonathan concentrate on their high school classes. The J Crew Band existed for only a few weeks. While the audience never saw the band, the performance onstage could not have happened without us. A musical connection, which is always an emotional one, was forged. Musicians connected with actors, the audience connected with performers and for The J Crew Band, we connected with each other.

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