



ON STAGE, AND ON TOP OF THE WORLD

Students from Sanford H. Calhoun High School in Merrick, New York, perform at Festival Disney. It was the high point of the school year for the students, and something that they looked forward to, says Sanford Sardo, director of choral activities.



For top-flight ensembles, competing at Festival Disney provides a dynamic and unique musical lesson.

| By Dave Simons

Holiday concerts and athletic events are standard fare for most school ensembles during any given year. The chance to compete against an array of talented music groups from around the United States in a nationally recognized setting, however, lets students see what they're really made of.

Enter Festival Disney, a competitive music festival for junior-high, middle and high-school ensembles. The event takes place each year from March through early May at Walt Disney World Resort.

Returning this year were the Sanford H. Calhoun High School Concert Choir and "Crescendo" specialty choir from Merrick, New York. This year the Show Choir was awarded best in Class and a Festival Disney Silver Award. The choirs also participated in the inaugural year, 2005.

Festival Disney
Where: Selected weekends, March 1-May 30, 2008
Who: Middle, junior and high school performance groups
Visit www.festivaldisney.com for more information

"The trip was a wonderful year-long motivator which got the students focused from Day One," says Sanford Sardo, the school's director of choral activities, "not only from a musical standpoint, but also in preparing the students for the mature, responsible conduct that is expected of them while we're traveling. It was the high point of the school year for the students, and something that they looked forward to."

Learning to perform and compete at a higher level are musical lessons in and of themselves. And just witnessing the process of high-level adjudication, and then going through a multi-school competition is valuable. Understanding a judge's criteria is also particularly instructive. These educational experiences are imparted in the lead up to a Disney visit, as well as during the days in the park.

To compete or not to compete
Students can compete with other schools in various award categories (including Best in Class and Festival Disney Gold, Silver and Bronze), or directors may choose the "ratings only" or "comments only" adjudication status. The Festival is capped by an exciting awards ceremony in a Theme Park where each ensemble is presented with an exclusive Festival Disney award. Students also receive a Festival Disney Medal to mark their participation.

Another recent participant was Stuart Middle School of Stuart, Florida. Under the direction of Al Hager, the school's symphonic and concert bands received "excellent" ratings, and its jazz band earned a "superior" mark. But ratings and winning isn't everything, of course.

"The ratings were not much of a concern to me or the students," Hager explains. "The purpose of music is not to win, but to learn and feel good about how you performed. Under any circumstances it should be a positive experience, and performing on a stage at Disney made it all the more exciting."

Crossing the finish line
The kids will tell you that the bus trip and getting to eat bits of candy was the best part," Hager jokes. "But the looks of confident apprehension during their time on stage were what it was all about."

Adds Sardo: "It's an educational experience that I never had when I was their age, and hopefully one that they will never forget. When we're on the bus from the airport, and we pass the Walt Disney World signs, the students' eyes light up!"

Calhoun students strut their stuff at Festival Disney.

Al Hager of Stuart Middle School in Stuart, Florida, receives an award—and a visit from Mickey Mouse.