

## Bringing Brahms to Babies

By Laura Geggel



Issley Ball, Nordstrom Recital Hall, Benaroya Hall

Linda Sebenius (left) and Lisa Allison perform last year at their Beethoven Tiny Tots show with the Seattle Symphony.

“Can you swing your arms to the music of Brahms?” said Lisa Allison and Linda Sebenius together at Seattle Symphony’s Tiny Tots series. The children readily agreed, lolling their arms from side to side as the music of Johannes Brahms spread throughout the concert hall.

The duo’s encouragement to the young audience reflected their long love of music. The twin sisters have been making their songs and lyrics available on CDs and DVDs with their company, Music Shine Media, formerly known as Identical Harmony. Allison, a Sammamish resident, and Sebenius, from Carnation, recently filmed “Let’s Have a Playdate with Brahms,” for ages 2 and up. “We felt like the music of Brahms

had a lot of energy and playfulness to it,” said Sebenius, music director of Music Shine Media. “People have an awareness of Brahms because of his lullaby.”

Local children from Lake Washington School District, Sammamish and Mercer Island run through Woodland Park Zoo and Pine Lake Park as Brahms’ music trills in the background. “The DVD is an excellent alternative to other forms of kids’ media because it has a lot of quality,” said Kim Stodel, one of the few adult actors in the film and husband to Allison and Sebenius’ niece. “It’s not so much sugar as it is nutrition.”

Allison and Sebenius grew up in Ohio, but migrated west for the University of Washington, where Sebenius studied music composition and Allison got her master’s degree in music education. “After college, we just started enjoying music together,” said Allison, artistic director for the company. “We did weddings and church functions. About 1994 it became a little bit more than just fun.” By then, both were teaching, Sebenius with Kindermusik in Issaquah, Redmond and Montessori schools and Allison in the Lake Washington School District.

In their spare time, they would compose music. “Lisa had this great idea for a song about an iguana, and she sang it to me. I said, ‘I like it, but it needs more,’” remembered Sebenius. At the time, the sisters were doing a series of 55 shows for the Seattle Public Library that featured music about deserts, oceans and forests. A song about an iguana only seemed natural. “The iguana is a funky, fun animal,” said Allison. She thought of the lyrics for “If You Wanna be an Iguana,” and related the tune to Sebenius, who had some ideas of her own. “I said, ‘How about in the middle, you do this silly, quirky thing,’” said Sebenius. “You’ll hear the song has two parts, but when it comes together it’s wonderful.” The iguana song got the most votes for people’s choice category for children’s songs in a 2005 international songwriting competition. The song will be on their upcoming fall DVD, “Singin’ Safari.”

Music Shine Media became a family affair after their brother, Michael Rudy, of Redmond, became their managing partner and one of his friends invested money into the company. Now the duo are making several movies a year instead of only one or two. "Our music is about letting your music shine," said Allison. "If we see a place where music will enhance a program, we'll write it."

Before releasing their Brahms DVD, Allison and Sebenius sent it to an expert, Dr. Dorothy Singer, co-director of the Yale University Family Television Research and Consultation Center. Singer had several ideas about how parents could work with the Brahms DVD to help their children learn more about music. "You can ask what do the children envision when they listen to the music," Singer said. "It would be wonderful to even get sheet music and follow along." Singer also praised the two for including local youth, and not professional actors.



Haylee Langton, 8, may not be in a DVD, but her soprano voice is trained by Allison. The Langtons saw the sisters perform in the Seattle Symphony Tiny Tots series when Haylee was younger. "When Haylee went to kindergarten, in walks Ms. Lisa, who was teaching music at Margaret Mead (Elementary School). Haylee freaked out because she had a celebrity for a teacher," said her mother, Sarah Langton. At the end of the year, when Sarah asked her daughter what activity she wanted to pursue, Haylee said that she wanted to sing. "Lisa took her at 6 instead of 7, and Haylee loves it," she said. "I've learned how to sing better and open more," said Haylee. "She makes up little songs that help you exaggerate in singing. I think that it's really fun to learn new songs."

Allison and Sebenius often see their students at their performances before they see them in their classes. Patina Muench's daughters saw a Tiny Tots concert before the elder daughter had Allison for kindergarten at Margaret Mead. The daughter later sang for Music Shine Media's "A Garden Full of Songs" CD. "My daughter is so proud that she's on that CD," Muench said.

The musical sisters were not sure if they should continue their program, but after Sebenius fell and shattered her leg last year, she decided to quit real estate and spend more time on Music Shine Media. Allison, who is on a leave of absence from teaching, is joining her. "We want to inspire children to learn more," Sebenius said.