

LET THE PERFORMER SHINE SCHOOLS HELP STUDENTS POLISH THEIR TALENTS

ARTS

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The popularity of TV shows such as “American Idol” and “Dancing with the Stars” is evidence of strong interest in the performing arts. That interest has led to rising enrollments for at least two Lake Norman area schools that specialize in teaching music, dance, drama and visual art to children and adults.

Creative Ej in Huntersville and Masterworks School of the Arts, with locations in Davidson and Mooresville, offer a variety of performance-type lessons.

While their students may not become instant stars, they do get many opportunities to perform on-site and in the community.

Creative Ej

Creative Ej, at 12340 Mount Holly-Huntersville Road in Huntersville, is two years old and has 250 students ranging in age from 3 to 64; the average age is 12. The school has 17 degreed music instructors, many of whom are experienced professional musicians. Owners Jeff and Elise Gastineau planned their 10,000-square-foot facility to give students a chance to network, play and perform music together.

“Most traditional music stores use old methods of teaching,” Jeff Gastineau says.

“They’re using the same piano books I used 30 years ago. We let our students choose their own music. We don’t want them to get bored and quit.”

Elise Gastineau, who has played piano since age 4, believes Creative Ej is bringing a taste of the big city music scene to the Lake Norman area.

“We exist to help students realize their musical dreams and passions,” she says. “We incorporate technology into lessons. We teach our students to research things on their own, to be independent. We want music to be something that motivates and inspires them.”

Creative Ej offers individual and group lessons on all contemporary instruments, as well as an active band program and a Kreative Kids program that combines singing, dancing and choreography to songs by Disney artists. The school offers classes and summer camps in audio engineering, making use of on-site audio and video recording studios. New programs include a trio of art classes and a daytime Homeschool Musical Theatre that teaches home-schooled students how to write and perform their own musical theater script.

Private music lessons cost \$100 a month for weekly half-hour lessons. Student band members pay \$100 a month for



Creative Ej students, such as Tyler Kilbourne, left, Will Keenan, Danielle Tancora and drummer Mason McClanahan, not only learn but also perform in bands.

weekly 60- to 90-minute rehearsals. Daytime classes start at \$35 a week.

Showcases are held quarterly in the school's 200-seat performance theater, giving students of all ages a chance to perform a solo, duet or band number on stage. Students from Creative Ej also have performed at local festivals, such as Denver Days, and special events, such as the Davidson Christmas parade.

"The students love performing," Elise Gastineau says. "And they learn organizational skills, especially if they're involved in a band, as well as team-building, nonverbal communication and stage presence."

The band program has led to formation of 15 student bands for musicians of all levels, ranging in age from 7-year-olds to adults. Mark Aspland, owner of Hands-On Woodworking in Cornelius, plays guitar in a contemporary jazz band at Creative Ej. "Most of the instructors have four-year music degrees, and they know what's involved in production work," he says. "That's something you can't find anywhere else."

Masterworks School of the Arts

The 5-year-old Masterworks School of the Arts has more than 300 students ranging in age from 3 to 79. Originally located at 442 S. Main St., Suite 100, in Davidson, the school now has a second location at 111 Kilson Road, Suite 103, in Mooresville.

Founders Dave and Susie Uibel envisioned Masterworks as the area's first comprehensive arts school where children and adults could study music, dance, visual art and theater in one location.

"The caliber of the instructors and the scope of our programs make us unique," Dave Uibel says. "The fact that our students can do everything in one location gives them a vision of the relationship between the different arts. We look for basic principles that operate in art, music and theater."

Masterworks uses a skill-based curriculum designed to build a strong foundation.

When students leave, they can read music, form a band or sing as part of an ensemble, he says.

"There's a perception that anybody can walk in off the streets and win 'American Idol'," he says. "But most people are not naturals – they have to work hard. Everybody who is going to really make it needs a foundation."

Twenty-five faculty members come from all over the country – all are university-trained, most have degrees and all have backgrounds as professional musicians.

Private lessons are offered on all popular instruments and in voice. Music classes include piano, violin, guitar, orchestra and a Mini-Masters program that gives preschoolers basic instruction in music, visual art, violin and piano. A class called All About Disney teaches kids all facets of performing a Disney number on stage.

Masterworks also has junior and senior show choirs for students ages 6 to 10 and 11 to 18. Each choir performs two full-scale stage musicals each year, complete with Broadway-style costumes and scenery.

Private lessons are \$105 a month. Classes range from \$50 to \$85 a month, and choir membership costs \$115 a month. Some scholarship aid is available.

Masterworks holds a "Performathon" each semester to give students at all levels a chance to perform in the school auditorium while proud parents and friends watch and applaud. The school's program helps kids build positive self-images, increase personal discipline and learn teamwork.

"Interest in the arts is booming in the Lake Norman area," Dave Uibel says. "We just have to give people a chance to cultivate their interest."

Patrick and Neely Alt of Davidson enrolled their 11-year-old daughter, Currin, in voice lessons at Masterworks.

"Currin has a lovely singing voice, but she was very shy," Neely Alt explains.

"She was hooked the first day – she went from my shrinking violet to my blossoming rose."

Both Currin and her twin sister, Claire, have since joined the show choir at Masterworks and appeared in last year's production of "High School Musical."

"Recitals are very informal," Alt says. "They expose kids to playing for others to build self-confidence. The audience applauds because you have the confidence to get up and do what you love. Masterworks is a gem."

