

An ode to Maria Montessori

Composer leads students in tribute to school pioneer

By Alexandra Fenwick
Staff Writer

WILTON — As 117 choral students filed into the music room at The Montessori School yesterday, composer and conductor Roberto Molinelli smiled.

"How lovely, incredible, wow," he marveled to himself at seeing the children who will be the first in the United States to perform his original cantata, "Montessoriana," at Norwalk Concert Hall tomorrow.

Molinelli wrote the piece in honor of Italian educator Maria Montessori, who founded the international educational philosophy practiced at the school's Norwalk and Wilton campuses and worldwide. The Montessori School students will perform the original work — in Italian — in honor of the 100th anniversary of the Montessori philosophy.

The students, ages 6 to 13, will be conducted by Molinelli and accompanied by the 32-piece Norwalk Symphony Orchestra.

Students were buzzing before meeting the man behind the music they have been practicing for months.

"I'm excited for someone to fly in from Rome and be our conductor," said 7-year-old Norwalk resident Gaby Pisano.

An animated man with a mop of dark hair and distinctive red eyeglasses, Molinelli greeted the students warmly.

"Let's say hello in Italian! Buon giorno! Ciao!" he boomed as the students repeated it back, their eyes wide and their grins wider.

Molinelli listened as the students ran through the music before taking over conducting duties from choral director Susan Marnell and unleashing a chorus of "bravissimos" in praise of their work.

"This time, a little bit forte! Stronger!" he told them.

Sarah Whaley, who will be one of four student soloists in tomorrow's performance, said she was excited to meet Molinelli.

"He's tall! And he really



Andrew Sullivan/Staff photos

Composer Roberto Molinelli conducts students yesterday at The Montessori School in Wilton. Students will perform Molinelli's 'Montessoriana' in honor of Maria Montessori and the 100th anniversary of the education method she founded.

Historic concert

Choral students of The Montessori School will perform "Montessoriana" tomorrow at the Norwalk Concert Hall, 125 East Ave.

Its composer, Roberto Molinelli, will conduct the students, accompanied by the 32-piece Norwalk Symphony Orchestra, in the U.S. debut of the original work.

A suggested donation is \$20 with all proceeds benefiting the Tibetan Children's Village and Cows for Kids in Kenya.

For reservations, call The Montessori School at 834-0440.

expresses himself when he conducts, and it's really fun to work with him," the 10-year-old Stamford girl said.

Jaelyn Haynie of Norwalk, Lauren Kranzlin of New Canaan and Quinn Fergusson of Westport also will perform solos.



Choral students rehearse yesterday at The Montessori School.

Other students were tickled by Molinelli as well.

"He's really funny," said Megan Elair, 14, of Norwalk. "All those bravos and big hand movements."

Molinelli, who also will play viola in the concert, is

a versatile musician. He has penned music for Barilla pasta television commercials in Italy and arranged music for Italian singer Andrea Bocelli's popular duet of "Time to Say Goodbye" with British vocalist Sarah Brightman.

He wrote "Montessoriana" in 2000 after the mayor of Montessori's birthplace — Chiariavalle, Italy — commissioned it for the opening of a national museum honoring her birth in 1870. The piece has not been

Please see ODE, Page A14

Ode

Continued from Page A13

performed outside of Italy.

School Director Mary Zeman asked Molinelli to come to Connecticut after seeing him conduct a group of Italian Montessori students at a celebration of Montessori's centenary in January in Rome.

"When I witnessed his vibrance and vitality and his connection with both the children and the music, I was immediately inspired to imagine him at our school," Zeman said.

Marnell, who will sing a soprano solo in the concert, said she knew her students could

learn the piece in time and welcomed the chance to perform alongside them.

"What's so cool about this piece is I get to sing with them," Marnell said. "That's the best part of the whole thing for me."

Molinelli tweaked some pronunciations and explained the mood of the songs at yesterday's run-through. The students will hold a full dress rehearsal with the orchestra today before their one-time performance tomorrow.

"I think the major challenge for the children will be to sing in Italian," Molinelli said be-

fore the students sang yesterday. "Susan has done the work before, so we will just do the final fixing."

Student Jacob Henny of Norwalk said learning Italian wasn't easy at first, but intensive practice helped. The students, who are taught to sight-read, learned the words and melody from sheet music.

"At the beginning it was a little hard, but as we started practicing a lot, we learned it," Jacob said.

Molinelli was impressed with their work.

"Your Italian is much better than my English," he compli-

mented the students after several run-throughs.

Working with children is especially rewarding, Molinelli said.

"It is a most beautiful thing as a composer to conduct my music with them," he said.

And though Molinelli did not attend a Montessori school as a child, he said he has found something special in common among students educated in the self-directed method.

"They are very quiet and kind, and I have met very kind and gentle people here," he said. "This is a happy group. I think it is a Montessori gift."