

Woodstock Community Unit School District 200

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WHS alumnus composes school concert finale

A former Woodstock High School music student flew across the country to see students perform his original composition at the high school's "Across the Universe" collage concert.

Alex Riak, an award-winning, Los Angeles-based composer, graduated from Woodstock High School in 2014. This past February, Woodstock music educators Lyndra Bastian and Brian Jozwiak had an idea to commission Riak for a piece to be performed by WHS choir, orchestra and band students.

"I'm so glad we reached out to Alex last year and were able to do this. Our kids really enjoyed this piece. It really challenged us all musically and technically which led to many great classes dissecting the piece and its intricacies," Bastian said.

Riak, who composes for television shows such as "Family Guy" among other projects, spent several months working on the piece titled "Unknown," before delivering it to his alma mater.

He first got a text from his younger brother Aidan, a sophomore orchestra student at WHS, telling him that the faculty was interested in a commissioned piece.

They had a Zoom call in February to talk about what they were looking for as a finale for the "Across the Universe" concert.

"I was really honored and excited. It's a huge opportunity. I'm really happy to be working with Woodstock High School students again. It's very nostalgic to be back here," Riak said.

Riak titled the piece "Unknown." "It was just a vague enough concept to be interesting and to have a lot of realms of possibility to explore."

He caught a red-eye flight from LA and was able to work with students as they rehearsed Thursday morning prior to the concert. He also spoke about his career journey from winning a first-place Illinois Music Education Association award to his studies at Illinois Wesleyan and winning a composing award at an independent film festival as a professional musician.

Both Riak and the music faculty said they hope students got something valuable from the experience of working together on “Unknown.”

“I hope they just continue their love for music. I know that D 200 as a whole has been really good about fostering a healthy attitude toward music and supporting the arts in general,” Riak said. “I just really hope they enjoyed it. I just want them to have a small fun memory that will last for a long time.”

Bastian said the experience was wonderful for her, choir director Brian Jozwiak, band director Kevin Frederick and all of the music students.

“It was absolutely worth it, and we hope the audience enjoyed it and appreciated all the work Mr. Riak and our students have poured into it,” she said.