

Singing in tongues: Teacher uses music in language lessons
By: Victoria R. Spagnoli
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Saratoga Springs - Growing up in Innsbruck, Austria, Waltraud Flynn's childhood was filled with music.

"I grew up with music. We were always singing," she said, adding that her mother's music teacher was Maria von Trapp.

So, combining music with her language lessons was natural.

"The minute we sing, I catch them all. They are just - there," she said.

Flynn teaches children ages 5 to 12 French, Italian and German at her European Language Enrichment School, an after school enrichment program, at the Saratoga Country Arts Center on Broadway.

"Music is really a major part," Flynn explained. "I'm from Austria, and we do a lot of singing, through the music (the children) can learn the language just a through plain reading."

While music is a major component of her classes, it's not the only thing. She also incorporates games, puppet shows and dancing along with other fun things in her lessons.

"It's a system which you learn through playing." She said in her elegant Austrian accent. A system, Flynn added, that she adapted from Austria's education system.

Flynn visits her homeland twice a year to see family and to visit schools and gather teaching materials not available in the United States.

"Everybody thinks this is a school with grades. It isn't a school. I don't want to mislead anybody," she said. Flynn incorporates learning with fun. Her classes teach a country's language and culture.

Flynn is a believer that being bi- or tri-lingual is an asset in today's world and that the best way to learn languages is to start young. She uses her own daughter, Patricia Flynn, as an example. Patricia, who speaks German, attended Cornell University and was able to study for one semester in Austria. She now attends graduate school in Los Angeles.

"The main thing is that you reach them when they are very young," Flynn said. "They are like little sponges. You can just throw everything at them."

One example, she said, was when one boy, 6-year-old Alan Anderson, started speaking Italian instead of French. "I told him it was French day, and he just switched," Flynn said. She gives private lessons in Italian to Alan, his 3-year-old brother, and both parents.

"It just shows you they can take in more languages than just one," she said. "The main thing is that you reach them when they are very young."

Her French classes run Thursday and Friday from 4:30-5:30 pm and Saturdays from 1-2 pm. German classes run Thursdays and Fridays from 5:30-6:30 pm and Saturdays from 2:15-3:15 pm. Flynn teaches Italian on Saturdays from 3:15-4:15 pm.

The classes cost \$60 a month to take one one-hour class per week. The classes have minimum of four and a maximum of seven students.

Flynn's love of language began when she was a student at an Austrian international hotel school. Students had to be fluent in several different languages in order to graduate. As a student there, Flynn spent a year in France - where she worked as an au pair - six months in Italy and six months in the United States.

After graduating, she worked for the Innsbruck tourist office, giving out information as well as acting as a translator for visiting dignitaries - including Queen of England.

It was 1963, a year before Innsbruck would host the Olympics, and Flynn was working as one of three city hostesses. It was a time, she said, when women weren't allowed to do what she was doing - etiquette wouldn't allow it.

"I was sort of hiding behind the mayor, who didn't speak any English," she said with a laugh.

Whenever the queen spoke, Flynn would whisper the translation to the mayor.

She came to the United States in 1970, and for the last 12 years has lived in the Capital region. She now lives in Moreau.

Her teaching began with her own children, and as they grew up, she began tutoring and teaching in local schools. She taught French at St. Mary's Academy and St. Alphonsus Regional School in Glens Falls; German at Spring Hill School in Saratoga Springs; and Italian in the gifted and talented program at BOCES.

It wasn't until she was laid off from St. Mary's Academy that she gave serious thought to running her own program.

"I really struggled very much the first couple of years," Flynn said, adding she did not advertise. All her students came from referrals or word of mouth.