

Music to honor Bataan vets unveiled

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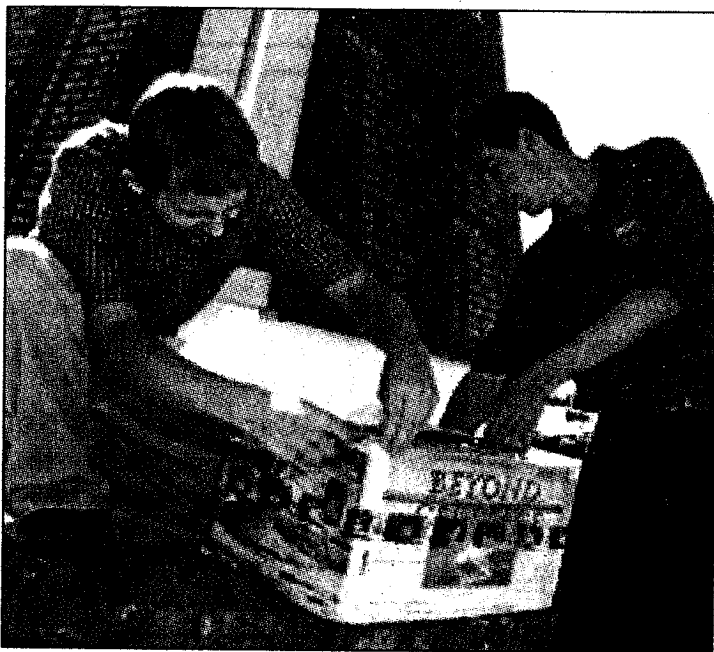
At exactly 3:33 p.m. on Thursday, they opened the box.

They were counting down to the moment, in fact.

After two years of working for it, members of the Goddard High School and Roswell High School bands — all members of the Nothing Other Than Excellence council — removed the copies of the score for composer Stephen Melillo's "Beyond Courage," music written to honor the American soldiers forced to march over 100 miles with no food or water in the 1942 Bataan Death March.

The 333-page scorebooks contain over 100 minutes of music for the work which will be premiered in concerts on April 3 and 4, 2004, by the Roswell Independent School District Honor Band and a 300-voice community chorus.

Goddard's Drew Jordan, NOTE president, said the project got its start when, "Two years ago, we tried to discuss what we were going to do for the upcoming year, and (Goddard High School band director Mike) Lee proposed that we commission a piece to honor the events that occurred on the Bataan Peninsula in World War II."



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Nothing Other Than Excellence president Drew Jordan of Goddard High School, left, and NOTE vice-president J.T. Humphreys of Roswell High School open the box containing scorebooks of composer Stephen Melillo's "Beyond Courage" at the war memorial of the Chaves County Administrative Complex in Roswell Thursday.

In the 1942 Bataan Death March, over 1,800 New Mexican soldiers were among those forced by Japanese troops to march 100 miles with no food or water. Only 800 of those 1,800 would survive before being liberated from POW camps three years later.

thousands more to die due to the malnutrition and disease of Japanese prison camps over the next three years.

"It's a conclusion of a long process for these kids," Roswell High School band director Kent Jordan said of the students' effort. "It's unusual for students to make

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a united effort like this over two years in preparation of something of this magnitude. It's been a real neat journey for all of us."

An unusual aspect to the April premiere of the work will be that the first performance on April 3 will only be open to Bataan survivors and their guests.

"The first time we play it, it will be for (Bataan survivors) and their friends and families," Lee said. "It's an important work, it's a very historically correct work and it's a very moving work."

The public premiere will take place the following day.

Roswell High's J.T. Humphreys, NOTE vice president, said that Melillo was chosen after a long process that started with a list of 15 composers replied to queries.

"We went through a pretty hard selection process on deciding who we wanted to do this," Humphreys said. "We narrowed it down to five, then to three, and our final decision was Stephen Melillo."

Melillo has scored television and film among other works.

"We're really excited. He had some exciting stuff to offer us," Humphreys added.

He also said that Melillo came to Roswell last spring to research the project to, "get a feel for what it's like in New Mexico so he can incorporate it into his music. He wanted that flavor."

Goddard's Lee added, "His stay when he was here was an incredible time for him. Everything that's happened since has been an incredible thing for him. He wants his son to meet these men (at the premiere)," Lee said.

Melillo was not in Roswell for Thursday's unveiling.

Local Bataan survivor Jack Aldrich was in attendance Thursday, and beamingly approved of the project.

"It's tremendous. And the thought that two high school bands are going to be involved this, I think that's a very unusual situation. They're just motivated," Aldrich said.

Aldrich added, "I can't imagine somebody's going to take a miserable thing like this and put it to music."

He was among the Bataan

survivors and local residents who spoke with Melillo during the composition process.

"It's so unusual for us to be connected with something," Aldrich said. "We, at times, have been involved with a lot of things. But music! It's incomprehensible."

Aldrich also said that, in addition to interviewing with Melillo, he and others sent the composer musical samples such as 1940s popular music and Native American pipe music.

The admiration for the men of Bataan runs high among those involved in the project.

"Our goal from the beginning has been to honor men like (Aldrich) who committed themselves and worked through it. They are true heroes," Kent Jordan said. "This project is bigger than Goddard High School and Roswell High School."

Dorothy Cave, Aldrich's wife, authored a book which served as source material for Melillo called, "Beyond Courage: Bataan Survivors."

"These men on Bataan, they were starved, they didn't have food. They didn't have any ammunition," Cave said. "They

didn't have anything except courage. They kept fighting."

Cave commented specifically on the bravery of the New Mexicans in the fight.

"The last people still there, still there intact, was a little tiny New Mexico regiment of national guardsmen," she said. "They were the first to fire, they were the last to lay down arms."

"There's a lot of things that have gone into this. It's going to mean a lot to a lot of people," Lee added.

Drew Jordan added that it is a multimedia event with video projection and portions of speeches by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, among other items.

The NOTE council is youth-directed group of musicians from both Goddard and Roswell High responsible for organizing the project. The work is being funded by the National Endowment for the Arts' Continental Harmony Program. The grant is one of only ten offered by NEA every year.