For the third performance, I decided to go to Plainwell’s Ransom Library on November 8, 2014.

It wasn’t much of a symphony performance, but it was interesting, and while we may have been a little too old, my friend and I had great conversations during the drive, and we enjoyed ourselves quite a bit.

As we arrived, we noticed that the Ransom Library was quite small. We didn’t know what to expect, but we didn’t think an entire orchestra could fit in the library. We barely managed to find parking, and walked in. We were greeted by a quaint small town library. We had arrived about thirty minutes early, and decided to walk around. The musicians, of whom there were only five, were just putting their instruments together. They had chairs assembled in a semi-circle. The library staff was still moving tables and assembling rows of chairs. We helped them finish setting up. About twenty minutes to eleven, children and their parents started streaming in. At this time, the five musicians invited the children to go play with their instruments, and learn a little about the instruments. This created a sort of “petting zoo”, to quote the description of the event, for the instruments.

At this point, I began to observe the musicians. They had brought music stands, a microphone, and an amplifier. What they were planning with the later items, I had no idea. About five minutes to eleven, a man came out and asked everybody to settle into the chairs and couches. At this time, I noted the library was full. By full I mean packed. There were about 100 people there to see the performance. In this little one-room library, that’s quite a lot. They’d left enough room in front of the musicians for children to sit, and sit they did. There were a lot of children.

Then, another man came out and sat down in front of the microphone. He began introducing the musicians, and their instruments. As it turns out, it was a woodwind quintet. I began to observe the individual musicians one at a time. Each seemed about the same age, around forty. The narrator, as the man in front of the microphone turned out to be, talked about the characters in the piece of music we would be enjoying.

We were going to listen to Prokofiev’s Peter and the Wolf. The composition felt like a children’s story had been made into music. It told a story.

The narrator continued going through the characters. There was a flute which would represent the role of the bird. There was an oboe representing the duck in the story. There was a bassoon, which represented the grandfather of the story. There was also a French horn which represented the wolf. Finally, there was a clarinet which represented the cat.

At this point, I noticed that the bassoon player was wearing orange suspenders, similar to what an elderly person would wear. Similarly, the clarinet and the French horn players had car ears on their head. I think this was pleasantly informal, and helped represent the characters to the children better. As the narrator introduced each instrument, the musician would play a very recognizable set of notes that the narrator explained would represent their specific character.

After going through all the characters, the narrator set the scene of the story. He said a few words, and then the musicians began playing. After a few seconds, they stopped, and let the narrator begin the story. The narrator would only say a few words, and then the musicians would play a little bit of music representing that part of the story.

Early on, I noticed that the flute played seemed to start the playing similar to a conductor. She nodded her head a four times to give the beat and then the musicians began playing. But, then I noticed it seemed to be whichever musician’s character had the lead role in that part of the story, as the bassoon player did the head nodding to start play and so did the French horn player. Something I noticed was that these musicians are very good at keeping time and starting without a conductor. While playing, no musician bobbed their head to indicate the beat, but all the players kept in sync very well.

I don’t remember very much about the actual music, just that it felt very much like it should be presented like I was experiencing it: with a narrator, to children. The melody was very happy for the most part, and I felt as though I was strolling through a forest during the daytime.

I realized that this performance was geared towards children, but as someone who hasn’t gone to many symphony performances, I felt like this was a very good experience for me. This was one of the only instances when music paints a very clear picture in my mind, and I quite enjoyed it.