



Mozart for Many

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Photo: Sandor Bodo

Sebastian Ruth, founder of the Community MusicWorks program for children in Providence, leads an orchestral workshop earlier this month.

Next to a grungy gas station and a sidewalk fruit stand run out of the back of pickup, strains of a Bartok string quartet waft from a Westminster Street storefront. Two neighborhood teens stop to listen, signal approval, then scamper off.

Welcome to the home of Community MusicWorks, which for the past decade has been a lone outpost in Providence's economically mixed West End, a project set up to bring a sense of self-esteem and accomplishment through classical music to kids who otherwise don't have a lot of advantages.

While most programs of this ilk take place in tony suburbs like Barrington and East Greenwich, the youngsters in Community MusicWorks come from trash-strewn neighborhoods, often from homes in which single parents work two jobs and speak little English.

But instead of rap, these teenagers play Mozart. The lessons they take are free, along with borrowed instruments that the program owns.

Community MusicWorks, which has 100 students and a long waiting list, is the brainchild of Brown University graduate Sebastian Ruth, a charismatic violinist who felt that classical

music should belong to everyone, not just an elite few. And that children from all backgrounds might take to it.

So Ruth and a group of young musicians, including his violinist wife Minna Choi, made the decision to live where they teach. Calling themselves the Providence String Quartet, they settled in the West End, staging potluck suppers for students and their parents, and busing them to concerts in Boston. They work out of a double storefront on Westminster Street, half office, half rehearsal space. A set of speakers allows passersby to hear the quartet practicing. Kids walking to and from school stop to listen and peer in the windows.

“I’m really hoping,” said Ruth, “that kids will say, ‘Oh yeah, I’ve got a quartet in my neighborhood and see them rehearsing all the time.’”

“More than the sequestered life that happens in a concert hall, we can make the musical experience more normal.”

While Ruth, tall, lean, with a shock of black hair, had doubts going into the project 10 years ago, those have been dispelled. Since then, the program has made remarkable inroads into the community.

“I get teary-eyed every time I think about it,” said Deborah Wyatt, director of the West End Community Center, where the group often performs and gives lessons.

“These kids [who take lessons] are so focused, so polished. They’ve found a place in the world.”

Bringing the community together

It’s not just a matter of teaching children the classics — although the program does that — it’s a matter of helping bring the community together, helping kids when there has been a crisis at home, helping single moms cope.

Last year the mother of a student required surgery, Ruth said, and was “really freaked” about who was going to tend her son, to get him to school and lessons.

So Ruth made a few calls. Parents came forward with offers to cook, clean, and chauffeur her youngster.

“The woman was so touched she cried,” said Ruth. “She knew people in church, but none of them offered help. But that’s what it’s about here. It’s about potluck suppers, and if kids miss a lesson the teacher calls,” he said.

Just the other day, dozens of youngsters got together to jam with folk musicians Chris Turner and Rachel Maloney at the Peace Street campus of The Met School, a public high school. The students played 12-bar accompaniments, while Turner, on the harmonica, and Maloney, on fiddle, added bluesy riffs. The young players ate it up.

“Part of what Community MusicWorks tries to do is give kids a force of expression even before their playing is very advanced,” said Ruth. “One of the real frustrations in classical music is that it takes so long to build a technique that you’re doing it for years before making an impact.”

The older members of the group got together later that evening to talk philosophy and plan benefits. They’ve been discussing Plato’s allegory of the cave and how that relates to racism in the community.

A senior group, handling everything from posters to tickets, put on a concert to benefit the residents of the Darfur region of Africa. Last year they raised funds for Hurricane Katrina relief.

How can music affect kids?

Ruth was an idealistic senior at Brown when he decided to set up a long-term residency in Providence’s West End, a neighborhood of restored Victorians next to rows of seedy three-families. He had gone to Brown to major in music, but also to take up educational philosophy.

“I was interested in what effect music could have on kids,” he said. “I knew I wanted to continue to play string quartets, yet was very interested in this way music can have an effect on people, and how to create an education that really focuses on how a person’s world view changes with the experience of music.”

Board president Karen Romer, former associate dean for academic affairs at Brown, met Ruth at Brown and said he stood out.

“I spent my professional life at Brown where there were a lot of inspiring people around,” said Romer, “but Sebastian is a very special person.”

It so happened that about the time Ruth was thinking of establishing a resident inner-city quartet he heard a National Public Radio broadcast about a Pittsburgh potter named Bill Strickland, who ran an arts program for neighborhood kids out of his basement. Soon it became obvious Strickland was not only teaching classes in pottery, but acting as a mentor for kids who had no other constructive outlet.

The idea struck Ruth: Wouldn’t it be intriguing to set up a string quartet in the middle of a neighborhood and see what happened, and invite young people to take part?

At first he thought the project might be viewed with suspicion, as just another Brown experiment foisted on a poorer neighborhood. But his fears weren’t confirmed. Shortly after the program started, he walked into the West End Community Center and asked if he could give free classical music lessons. The reply was a resounding “yes.” Even more encouraging was the enthusiasm of kids who sat spellbound listening to Ruth and friends play Mozart. They were quick to sign up for lessons.

Kids are not pushed to become professional musicians, though. The idea is more to instill a sense of discipline and confidence in participants, although some will no doubt take up music as a profession.

“The goal,” said Ruth, “is to trigger their imagination and see what’s possible in their lives.” If a child has successfully spent six or seven years learning to play a cello, that person might see that it’s possible to accomplish any dream, even studying “bugs in South America. That’s a project they could follow through on.”

Students also might want to use their enthusiasm to go to college and return to work on issues in their neighborhood, said Ruth.

A model for other music groups

Right now conservatories and music schools are looking to Community MusicWorks as a model. A quartet is about to move from Colorado to New Haven, Conn., to start a similar program, and advanced students from the New England Conservatory in Boston and the Longy School of Music in Cambridge are considering a similar venture. The beauty of the project is that it doesn’t separate professional, high-level performers and teachers. Indeed, Ruth and his colleagues are part of a professional quartet that gives regular concerts at places like the Providence Athenaeum, soup kitchens and libraries, while they work with 10-year-olds in community centers and take up school residencies — a blend that is frequently more rewarding than a straight orchestra job.

“I think they are sort of setting the trend where more organizations can make that kind of commitment,” said Tanya Maggi, head of community programs from the New England Conservatory, where some 200 students, or a quarter of the student body, are involved in outreach activities.

“I think a lot of organizations are following their lead and looking for long-term partnerships. They don’t want to make a choice to just be a performer or just be a teacher,” said Maggi, “they want a blend of both aspects. It’s an option that wasn’t there 10 years ago.”

To make sure the spirit of Community MusicWorks spreads, the organization has taken on two fellows who are learning the ropes so they can set up similar programs in other cities.

“I think musicians coming out of school get sick of meaningless gigs and see something like this as more fulfilling,” said Laura Thomas-Merino, one of the fellows. She moved here from Los Angeles with her boyfriend Mark Kellogg, a graduate student in digital media at the Rhode Island School of Design.

“I came here last August, and it’s been an amazingly refreshing change of pace” from life in Los Angeles, where she drove from home to home to give cello lessons.

Community MusicWorks, with a budget of \$480,000, provides a living wage, along with medical insurance. The group recently received a \$195,000 grant from New York’s Surdna

Foundation. The idea has always been that the program would provide true employment opportunities.

“We don’t want our musicians starving or volunteering,” said Ruth.

‘The cello keeps me stable’

It is afternoon at the West End Community Center, where Ruth and the quartet give a lot of their lessons. Murals of clouds and fruit trees and human figures cover the walls. Nine-year-old Alana Perez explains how playing the violin relaxes her so that she is no longer anxious about tests in school.

Alana and Heather Argueta, 8, are showing off their solo chops this afternoon. Ruth plays a blues accompaniment and the two little girls take turns improvising torrid solos with outlandish slides and dissonances.

The two played together with maverick cellist Matt Haimovitz, one of several noted artists who have come to town to give concerts and spend time with the students in the program.

As a 10th anniversary fundraiser, pianist Jonathan Biss, a rising star in the classical field, and his mother Miriam Fried, a noted violinist, will give an all-Beethoven program today at 4 p.m. in Providence (see accompanying story for tickets).

Biss, who has become a major player in recent years, was here once before, playing Brahms with members of the Providence String Quartet. The other members of the quartet are violinist Jesse Holstein, violinist Jessie Montgomery and cellist Sara Stalnaker.

In an e-mail interview from Finland, Biss said that even though kids in the program aren’t necessarily going into music as a profession, it’s important that music be a part of their lives.

“The quartet believes passionately [as I do] that the benefits of having music in one’s life are too fundamental, and too wide-ranging to be listed.”

They can be listed, though, for Kirby Vasquez, who was busy the other day working on the Darfur benefit. Kirby’s 14, and she was talked into playing the cello by Ruth. She didn’t even know what a cello was at first.

Her mom is from Mexico, she goes to Classical High School and she wants a career in computer graphics. But last year things got bad at home. Her father left. She said she couldn’t take what was going on, and quit playing for a while. Nothing felt normal.

“But I talked to my teacher and she helped me come back,” said Kirby. “Everything was a mess, but she showed me that playing the cello could keep things stable.

“And that’s why I keep coming back, to make it stable for me and comfortable.”