Building a Community Through Classical Music

Community MusicWorks celebrates its tenth year with a concert, some food and a new violin

By Nancy Kirsch

The three “Bs” – Bach, Beethoven and Brahms – may be most people’s first thoughts about classical music. But, across town on Westminster Street, the innovative folks at Community MusicWorks also think classical music can be a critical force to change entire neighborhoods.

To promote this kind of thinking, these talented young classical musicians of Community MusicWorks have been teaching, performing and living on the West Side of Providence for the past ten years. And this month, to celebrate their first decade of providing free music education, performance and mentoring programs to at-risk children in Providence, they’re throwing themselves a party, which we’re all invited to attend.

Violin/violaist Sebastian Ruth, 31, founded Community MusicWorks after he graduated from Brown in 1997. He had received a $10,000 public service fellowship from Brown’s Swearer Center. With that shoestring budget, the organization provided violin lessons to fifteen children. Fast forward to today: Community MusicWorks, with a staff of nine, provides music lessons and more to 100 young people. Those students are the lucky ones, as the organization reported a waiting list of some 120 other applicants eager to participate last year.

Members of the Providence String Quartet, the quartet-in-residence for Community MusicWorks, teach violin, viola and cello to school-age children in after-school lessons each week. They mentor these students, perform locally and organize community building events for families. Community MusicWorks students, 90% of whom re-enroll in the program, attend the free lessons at local community centers and keep their musical instruments throughout the academic year.

A new Fellowship Program, created last September, allows two young professional musicians to work in the organization for a two year commitment. During that period, they teach, perform with the Providence String Quartet and develop a deeper appreciation for Community MusicWorks’ approach to community arts education before they attempt to implement these ideas elsewhere. With this added teaching staff, Community Music Works can reach an additional 35 students.

“Music can be much more than concerts and recordings,” says Ruth. “It can be a vehicle for people to come together in community and form strong bonds. The community of youth, their families, artists and audience members that has grown up around our work is very welcoming to people.”

With weekly instrument lessons, monthly musical workshops, monthly concert trips for families, quarterly Performance Parties and Youth...