Everything you need to know about steak. How to grill it, what to drink with it and where to find it locally. PLUS Grass-fed vs. grain-fed, the lowdown on 7 high-end steakhouses and why Wagyu is worth the sticker shock.

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TOXIC SOIL One Tiverton neighborhood’s nightmare

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PLUS How Chopin is rescuing inner-city kids from the streets
Fifteen-year-old Joshua Rodriguez outside the Met School in Providence.
Notes FROM THE HOOD

In a tough South Providence neighborhood, young musicians learn more than mastering the fiddle. They discover classical music can rescue them from inner city life.

By Lisa Palmer  Photography by Patrick O'Connor
Joshua Rodriguez is cool and casual, with tight brown curls, braces on his teeth and an angular, pensive face—the sort of teenager you might pass in the mall or on the sidewalk but not recollect. A black nylon case that contains his viola hangs from his shoulder. He appears to be mostly baggy jeans and hooded sweatshirt. An hour from now, with his instrument propped under his chin and his bow pressed to the strings, he would be easier to remember because there aren’t many boys of Dominican immigrants playing Chopin in Providence. Joshua is fifteen years old. He decided to play the viola when he was seven, even though he had never before heard of the viola. But now, as a tenth grader, he has learned to love it and often says things like “Playing music did something to me” and “Music made me smarter.”

Last summer Joshua tried to quit playing the viola. He didn’t want to practice. He didn’t want to go to his lessons. He didn’t go to his audition with the Rhode Island Philharmonic’s Youth Orchestra, where he has played for the last four years. He had lost his enthusiasm for the instrument. He thought he would rather spend his time fingerling the controls of his Game Cube video game or hanging out with his friends near the corner of Elmwood Avenue. But he had a change of heart after a meeting with his viola teacher at Community MusicWorks, Jesse Holstein, who convinced him to keep playing and suggested he learn from another teacher, Sebastian Ruth.

Outside, beyond the walls of his family’s second-floor living room, which is painted nacho cheese orange and decorated with vibrant paintings of the Dominican Republic, Joshua’s friends gravitate to the porch rail of the house next door where they live. The boys are straining their ears and craning their necks to determine whether their friend has finished practicing. For more than half his lifetime, Joshua has devoted part of each day to practicing classical music. With time, he has become deeply devoted to the viola and ensnared by the work of Community MusicWorks, but his friends in the neighborhood and his teachers at school know little about that. While they’ve accepted his love for classical music and the viola, other kids at school think it’s weird. “But they’re not my friends anyway, so I don’t care,” says Joshua, who listens to a variety of music, from rock bands such as My Chemical Romance to rapper Kanye West.

Instead, Joshua says kids his age are spending their days bored, at times making prank phone calls or playing ding dong ditch it. Some are playing whiffle ball or catch with a football in the streets. Some are selling drugs. Others are involved in gang violence. Teachers at his high school, Providence Academy of International Studies (PAIS), find it unbelievable that Joshua favors Bach and Beethoven over basketball. “They tell me, ‘The way you look, the way you dress, I never would’ve guessed you play the viola,’” he says.

They also never would have guessed how the magical mix of classical music and Community MusicWorks has changed the lives of West End and South Providence kids like Joshua, who face the grimmest of statistics. Teen pregnancy, crime and drug abuse are the highest in the city. High schools in the area have been coined “dropout factories.” At Joshua’s school, one out of three students quits before finishing senior year. More than half of his school peers are from homes with incomes so low they qualify for free or subsidized lunch, a poverty indicator.

**Sustaining Joshua**

It is late on a recent Monday afternoon, and Joshua is taking his instrument out of its case. Sebastian sets up a music stand in the storefront window of the Providence String Quartet practice room on Westminster Street. Next door are the Community MusicWorks administrative offices. In the other direction, attendants at a cut-rate gas station repair cars, and street vendors sell fruit from cardboard boxes on the sidewalk. Sirens blare from a police car as it races past, and an SUV with its windows open leaves hip-hop music in its wake. Joshua bears down on a string timidly as he tries to tune his instrument.

“Not like that,” says Sebastian. “Tell people what you’re all about. You are about a powerful sound. It’s a proud thing. You don’t want to sound like you apologize when you tune. Not, oh I’m sorry to be here making squeaky changes. Stand tall. Be proud.” Sebastian’s viola erupts with sound as he demonstrates concert worthy scales.
Kids his age are spending their days bored, making prank phone calls or playing DING DONG DITCH IT. Some are selling drugs. Others are involved in gang violence.

Now, Joshua presses his bow firmly. Loud, deep tones emerge from the viola. Sebastian adds, “Yes! You're somebody. You’re a musician. You’re tuning. No need to apologize!”

Joshua begins this lesson the same way he starts each weekly, hour-long session with Sebastian: with scales. Today it is C major and then D major, which involves an advanced technique called shifting. He is reminded: springy fingers and gratissimo. They check in with each other. “How’s it going?” Sebastian asks.

“I got an A on my geometry test,” Joshua says as he rifles through his pocket and shows the printout of the grade. Then, it’s back to playing. One note sparks a pause and more discussion.

“I downloaded the most amazing song on iTunes,” Joshua says.

“Oh, yeah?” Sebastian says. “What was it?”

“I don’t know the name of the song, but it was in the movie Schindler’s List. It was so cool. It’s a sad, sad song, but so beautiful. And you can’t believe it, but YouTube has the video of the actual guy playing the violin,” Joshua says. “I want to learn how to play it one day.”

“You mean like this?” Sebastian says, and then on his viola he begins playing the soulful theme music to Schindler’s List. It is a moody, lyrical piece with notes that are evocative of Eastern music.
European Jewish melodies. Itzhak Perlman recorded it for the movie's score.

"You can play it? You can play it?" Joshua squeals. Silence. Awe may be too subtle a word to describe this moment for him, but soon he adds, "Oh, man. You know how to play it just like that?"

"One day you will play it, too," says Sebastian. "It's not overly complex."

With the heel of his loafer, Sebastian taps the rhythm for the music Joshua is practicing today. It is a technique piece, an etude by composer Rodolphe Kreutzer. The song requires techniques that are difficult for Joshua. He is making mistakes but labors through it.

"I guess practice makes perfect," Joshua says.

"Practice makes better," Sebastian corrects. "Perfect is a funny, elusive concept."

**Softening Hard Edges**

One thing Sebastian wants you to know is that the primary mission of Community MusicWorks is not just to

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Clockwise from top: Nine-year-old Karla Monge practices the violin. Violin and viola teacher Jesse Hoistien catches up with violin student Christian Yang, seven. Seventeen-year-old Fatima Johnson (foreground), a CMW student for ten years, prepares for a recital with Erick Delao Jr., also seventeen, and a CMW student since September 2006, with violin teacher Minna Choi.
teach music, even though that is what it said in a 2006 New Yorker article that featured the group. Teaching is a main goal, since nine musicians each conduct ten to fifteen lessons a week. But, says Sebastian, the mission has more to do with how a professional string quartet establishes itself long-term within the everyday workings of an inner-city neighborhood while developing a mutual love: a love for music, a love for learning and a love for community.

Sebastian is rangy and poised. He has wavy dark hair, azure blue eyes and a hint of a soul patch below his lower lip. Just about always he wears a neatly pressed dress shirt and blue jeans, unless it’s a performance day, when he just about always wears a suit. At thirty-two, he knows all about music and has developed a passion for it, having mastered both the viola and violin. Sebastian also knows about community-building and how to mix his charisma with innovative education ideologies that center on pride, self-respect, social justice and commitment. He founded the non-profit music program on those tenets in 1997 with fifteen students and a $15,000 budget, much of it from a grant from Brown University, his alma mater. In the last ten years, the fledgling music program has swelled to 115 students and a budget of $575,000, funded with private donations and grants. Students age seven and up receive free music instruction; the use of violins, violas and cellos is also free.

The success of Community MusicWorks hinges on the professional and artistic talents of its core leaders, the Providence String Quartet players, which, in addition to Sebastian, include violinist Jesse Holstein, violinist Jessie Montgomery and cellist Sara Stalnaker. Together, they have crafted a West End neighborhood after-school arts program judged by a presidential committee as one of the fifty best in the country.

“At Community MusicWorks, there are educational goals, community building goals, artistic goals, but it all wraps up into the idea of how you can deeply engage a quartet with an urban community,” Sebastian says. That unfathomable commitment is the reason Joshua wasn’t booted from the program last summer when he wasn’t practicing, when he wanted to quit. If students miss three lessons, they may be temporarily suspended, but Sebastian adds, “We don’t say show up or ship out. First of all, we are introducing something people didn’t clamor for. They didn’t say, could we please have a string quartet come to our neighborhood? We have to teach accountability by setting boundaries; kids have to show up for lessons. But we also find ways to make it work.”

For Joshua, making it work meant changing teachers. He confides that over the years he simply became too close to his old teacher, Jesse. Joshua says, “He’s like family. We were too comfortable with each other, and I didn’t take him seriously.”

For others, making it work has meant that teachers call each of their students every night to remind them to practice, or they stop by a student’s home mid-week. It has meant holding impromptu lessons over the phone or helping to coordinate rides with other students. It has meant truly understanding the rough edges of life in the West End.

Sebastian explains, “To assume that a student didn’t show up for a lesson because she was not disciplined enough or lacked interest, then you sell the kid short nine times out of ten. If you call instead and find out that mom’s car had no gas and she had no money to put gas into the car and the pastor that sometimes drives her couldn’t drive her that day. And you find out that the kid had wanted nothing more than to be at the viola lesson but it just didn’t work, that it really didn’t work, at a level a lot of people don’t really understand, then do you punish that kid for not showing up to the lesson? Who really in her heart wants to be there?

“I knew that nothing was working for one of my students. In the time that I had her for viola lessons, she was beating up kids at school, and nothing was working for her. But church was working for her, her pastor was incredible; and viola was working for her, she loved the music,” Sebastian pauses to get the words just right. “So sometimes you wonder, am I a social worker for this kid? Yes, being a musician at Community MusicWorks is that way sometimes. This is all part of the picture as we define it. The long-term mentoring and teaching, once you start with the message, that we really do care about musicians in our program, that it is part of our job if you don’t show up, because it is part of our job to keep you there. Like, what does that message do for them? It says, here is this group of people who really cares if I’m there. And if I don’t show up for the lesson, I will get a call from the teacher that night.”

That let’s-not-fail attitude and long-term vow to the youth and families in the neighborhood could account for Community MusicWorks’ soaring success and its 90 percent retention rate. About fifty kids are on the waiting list, which was as high as 130 kids two years ago before more teachers were added to the staff.

Community and Commitment

In an empty classroom at the Met School on Dexter Street in Providence, Fidelia Vasquez, a sophomore at 11 CONTINUED ON PAGE 93
Notes from the Hood

Classical High School who just turned fifteen, is flipping through a photo scrapbook that Sara Stalnaker gave her as a birthday present. Sara has been Fidelia’s cello teacher since she was eight, and judging by the reminiscing going on, she is glad Community MusicWorks cemented a bond. When Fidelia was twelve, she suddenly stopped going to her lessons. Sara called her each week. Fidelia, the daughter of Mexican immigrants, explains, “I wanted to stop playing. I just shut down inside. I didn’t practice.” She finally revealed the reason behind her suspended interest when Sara took her out for a cup of hot chocolate at a West End café.

“My parents were having difficulty,” Fidelia says. “I started living just with my mom, but it was a very hard time. I didn’t want to talk to anyone. I didn’t want to do anything. But Sara kept calling me. I was like, why don’t she get it? I’m quitting.” Eventually, about six months later, she re-enrolled in Community MusicWorks. She took extra lessons with Sara to catch up with her peers and even began practicing with a music mentor, a Brown University student, every Sunday afternoon. Since returning to the program, Fidelia has vanished her lifelong shyness. She was elected to the Board of Directors at Community MusicWorks and performs music with a student quartet at private functions throughout the city.

A few weeks later, on a dark, windy and rainy Saturday afternoon, about a hundred parents and music students are sitting on folding chairs at the Met. Babies fidget on the laps of their parents. Toddlers point and wave at their siblings who are queued-up and waiting to play their instruments. One corner of the octagonal room is transformed into the stage. Fidelia and Sebastian stand in front of the assembled group. “Thank you for coming here on this beautiful day,” he says. A few people chuckle. Fidelia, who is Sebastian’s interpreter today, says, “Gracias por venir en este día hermoso.” Everyone laughs.

There is great excitement as students gather to perform for family members and eat a potluck supper. A calico quilt of cultures is represented; many of the young musicians are children of immigrant parents from countries such as Mexico, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Liberia and Cambodia. Few links exist between these cultures in the West End and South Side, but at Community MusicWorks everyone makes a connection. Every couple of months, parents and students come together for potluck or spaghetti dinners where socializing and building community ties are as important as the music. Guest musicians often join the Providence String Quartet, including world-renowned pianist Jonathan Biss who recently performed.

Social Justice

Having Biss play with the quartet on a small grand piano in the middle of a basketball court in the poorest neighborhood of Providence was a defining moment for Sebastian and for Community MusicWorks. Why? Because the experience has become utterly normal.

“Look at the streets and schools and sidewalks and playgrounds in the neighborhood. They are entirely below standard,” says Sebastian. “So our idea is, let’s do music that is the other extreme. Let’s send the message that you are worthy, that music is worth it. Have Jonathan here playing the Brahms piano quintet in this crowded gym, we are changing the idea of what is acceptable, and we are doing it in a way that is part of the community. Eat a spaghetti dinner and come next door for a concert.”

Fidelia, Joshua and more than a dozen other teenage students are enrolled in Phase 2, a deeper, more intensive music learning program within Community MusicWorks. This means students spend four to five days at events with the group. For instance, Joshua takes lessons on Monday afternoons, has fiddle class on Thursdays, goes to music theory class on Wednesdays, and every other Friday has Phase 2 from four to eight o’clock. Concert trips are often held on weekends.

Joshua likes the intensity. “It keeps me off the streets so I don’t get into trouble,” he says. At Phase 2, the students practice music, socialize, eat dinner together and take part in thought-provoking discussions of emotional and social issues. For the Providence String Quartet, that means taking on additional roles as philosophers.

Last year, Phase 2 spent three Fridays discussing Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, which tells the tale of prisoners in a cave who have no knowledge of the outside world. It was the type of discussion Sebastian had always hoped for: “This is an age, especially the later teens, when the kids are thinking about a lot of things, but they don’t necessarily talk about those things with adults around them,” he says.

Phase 2 students extended the story to examples from their lives. They shared stories of racial injustice, such as when they had walked into a store behind white kids but were the ones the store clerk followed around.

Over just about everything else at Community MusicWorks, Joshua favors the group discussion sessions. He says they provide life skills and a bridge to the broader world. Sure, Joshua likes his lessons. He likes the daylong trips to free concerts, such as the one he took to the Boston Philharmonic on a recent Sunday. He likes attending workshops with visiting musicians. One of them is Haitian-American Daniel Bernard Roumain, who heightened the cool factor of classical music at a concert when Joshua learned the violins and composer, who sports waist-long dreadlocks and a nose ring and dubs his music “crazed violin,” is sponsored by the sneaker company Puma. But, if he has to rank one element of his involvement above others, Joshua says Fridays at Phase 2 is at the top. He adds, “Community MusicWorks isn’t just about instruments.”

“Juilliard, Anyone?”

It is unlikely that Community MusicWorks students will ever attend Juilliard, especially since developing wunderkind musicians is not the organization’s mission. Sure, it could happen. Their teachers are among the most accomplished in Providence, have received undergraduate and master’s degrees in music and performance. And, one of them, Jesse Montgomery, studied at Juilliard herself. Still, it is not a priority that students become professional musicians.

But that is exactly what Joshua wants to do. “I want to be a famous musician. I want to go to that music college in Boston. It begins with a B,” he says. Berklee College of Music. “It’s my all-time goal. It feels weird that you are ahead of your friends, but I am pretty sure what I want to be. I want to be a musician.”

Joshua is at a turning point. He is taking his music more seriously than ever, says Sebastian. Being a professional musician is out of the question. “Kids who learn music at CMW are not like kids who come from programs that just learn music in a tube,” he says. “They think and talk about community issues while spiraling with their technical skills on their instruments. By the time they go through CMW, those are the musicians I will want to listen to because they will have a lot to say on their instruments in a way that the wunderkind doesn’t always have.”

For Joshua, keeping with the program through high school—long enough to realize his dreams—will continue to be difficult. There is the pull from the street and his friends in the neighborhood. There’s also the pressure to take on an after-school job at a retail store or fast food restaurant.

Paying the older students who are serious about music to work for Community MusicWorks in a Phase 3 quartet is Sebastian’s goal in the coming year. Phase 3 players will perform at private functions, mentor younger students, work as after-school coordinators and help administrative staff. There’s an intention for circular generation thing going on,” Sebastian says. The stipend is yet another way Community MusicWorks plans to entice committed musicians to keep playing music instead of working part-time elsewhere.

Joshua’s cousin, Vanessa Centeno, nineteen, wishes that Phase 3 had been an option for her when she was a senior. Now a Rhode Island College sophomore, Vanessa studied violin with Sebastian between the ages of ten and seventeen, but she wasn’t able to make it to most of her lessons or to group events during her last year of high school. At the time, she worked twenty hours a week. Her job at Showcase Cinemas paid $7 per hour, and she used the money for basic items, like clothing and school supplies, which her mother could not afford. She says, “Everyone at Community MusicWorks was like family to me. I missed out. Taking a job was a difficult decision, but I needed to earn money. I wish I could have played my violin or been in a Phase 3 program.” Vanessa still plays the violin from time to time. She plays because the music calms her, especially when she has a stressful day.

But then again, Community MusicWorks isn’t just about instruments.