



BOWS IN THE HOOD

How one string quartet makes a difference in its home city

The opportunities in the classical-music world for performing—orchestras, concert series, and things—are not necessarily enough to fulfill a musician's needs. You need to find the places where your music is going to have an impact on people's lives."

So says violinist and violist Sebastian Ruth, founder of Community MusicWorks in Providence, Rhode Island. His nonprofit organization supports a quartet in residence, the Providence String Quartet, and provides free string lessons to youths living in the city's hard-hit Olneyville neighborhood.

HELPING HAND: Violinist Minna Choi of the Providence String Quartet coaches kids at a unique residency program.

BY SIMONE SOLONDZ

Bows in the Hood

Members of Community MusicWorks divide their time between performing as a quartet and teaching and mentoring inner-city kids. "The risk factors for these kids are so high, the poverty levels are high, high school completion rates are low, and drug abuse rates are high," he says. "To see them bonding and supporting each other is great."

The students regularly put on performances that draw parents and other members of the community, and Community MusicWorks organizes musical outings, such as trips to see the Rhode Island Philharmonic perform, for the students and their families.

"It's not uncommon in a university or conservatory for there to be a string quartet in residence," Ruth explains, "but we're trying to extend that model into the community."

Ruth and his wife, violinist Minna Choi, another founding member of the Providence String Quartet, have been playing together since their college days at Brown University in the mid-'90s. There they studied with the Charleston String Quartet, which was in resi-



ALL TOGETHER NOW: Students focus at a workshop.

dence at Brown at the time. "Through their teaching and work in the community, they encouraged us to think about musicianship in a broader arena," says Ruth.

When he graduated in 1997, Ruth was awarded a fellowship from the Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown, and he used the grant as seed money for Community MusicWorks. He modeled the organization in part after the Chamber Music Rural Residency Program, an enterprise jointly sponsored by Chamber Music America and the National

Endowment for the Arts that provides funding to allow groups of chamber musicians to live, teach, and perform in rural communities.

Unlike the Rural Residency Program, however, Community MusicWorks is based on a permanent residency in an urban environment.

At first, Ruth and Choi were the only musicians teaching students and getting paid for their time, but the program has increased dramatically over the years and now supports four full-time

musicians: Ruth, Choi, violinist Jesse Holstein, and cellist Sara Stalnakar. Fundraising is handled by Ruth, the board of directors, and a full-time staffer.

Choi is on a leave of absence from the Providence String Quartet while she completes a masters degree in violin performance at the Hartt School of Music. Her replacement is violinist Jessie Montgomery, a recent graduate of The Juilliard School.

"We started mostly with volunteer staff," says Ruth, "but we're now building up the non-

profit infrastructure and making it sustainable. Everyone is on salary with health insurance, which is kind of unique for a chamber musician working outside of the university setting."

The quartet initially performed in local schools to draw students into the after-school program. "We would take part of a quartet we were working on—Beethoven or Piazzolla or something—and break it down. We'd perform a little bit and then talk about the instruments and discuss the relationships between the instruments in a quartet," says Ruth.

The response to the program was enthusiastic, and there are now 65 students enrolled and 100 more on the waiting list.

All students attend small group classes in violin, viola, or cello taught in neighborhood community centers by the members of the Providence String Quartet. Community MusicWorks provides them with instruments they may keep throughout the school year, free of charge. Students also participate in music workshops every other Friday, which feature local and touring musicians who present a particular technique or style in an interactive environment. The more advanced students also receive private lessons.

"It ranges from classical to jazz to hip-hop to gospel," Ruth says. "We have conductors, storytellers, and a wide range of presenters. It's a great opportunity for the musicians. We pay them at a professional rate, and they get a lot of energy from our students."

In recent years, workshops have been taught by the Turtle Island String Quartet, the Orion String Quartet, and American pianist Jonathan Biss.

Students and their families also are invited to nearby classical-music performances by such organizations as the Boston Philharmonic and the Rhode Island Philharmonic. The tickets are free, and Community MusicWorks provides free transportation. Ruth and the other teachers believe that the performances expose the students to possibilities they were previously unaware of, broadening their views of themselves and the world.

The goal of the program, says Ruth, is transformation. "It's about music and musicianship becoming an opportunity for people to develop a voice for expression and develop a supportive community in

which to grow," he explains. Some of that support comes from the close relationships that form between the students and teachers. For some students, the teachers are the only adults, other than their parents, who spend any real time with them. The educators are people who remain in their lives for years, acting not just as teachers but as mentors.

Some of the support comes from the students' own family members, most of whom did not have the opportunity to study a musical instrument when they were children and many of whom have not missed a single performance by their kids.

But the strongest and most life-changing support comes from the other students in the program. Those who have studied for three or more years are encouraged to participate in Phase 2 of the program, in which they play chamber music together in quartets and larger ensembles and attend weekend retreats.

"They've really become a close-knit community," Ruth says. "I see them supporting each other and giving each other feedback. I love this kind of atmosphere, where music is not in a formal environment—it's a group of kids having fun." □