

Feature: My City: On the West End

By Eliza Domingo

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According to Sebastian Ruth, Community Music Does Work

This weekend, from March 28-29, a conference entitled, "Imagining Art + Social Change" is taking place in Providence, masterminded by six of our city's best known community arts groups that have had a strong hand in shaping young minds. One of those groups, Community MusicWorks, founded and led by musician Sebastian Ruth, aims to shed light that collaborations like these are very effective

methods for building stronger communities and for nurturing the creative leaders of the future.

Ruth, who is a highly skilled violist and violinist, carts a decade-long career of injecting new and classical music into urban settings – particularly the West End and Southside neighborhoods of Providence – which began through a fellowship he garnered as a student and social activist at Brown. When asked what made him imagine the notion that classical music had any place in an urban neighborhood, Ruth reflected back on his transformative decision to forego "a high-glamour concert career," for the kind of work that he believes makes a meaningful impact on the world.

You founded Community MusicWorks eleven years ago with "the conviction that music and musicians have an important role to play in creating and transforming communities." Does this still ring true for you today?

It's absolutely still the core of the work. We're constantly exploring what ways that can be true, and in what ways we can play a role in creating community and performances. I think one of the most tangible manifestations of this is the community of parents and students who are involved in Community MusicWorks. It's become a very supportive, cohesive group of people who support one another. It's all around music. They come to our concerts. They come to the students' performances. Families come together to go on trips to concerts. But, there's a wonderful support net that people provide for one another.

For instance, we had a single parent of one of our students who recently fell ill. She was having a really hard time taking care of her son at the same time trying to manage her illness. When I put the word out to our parent committee, a number of other parents from the program helped her with cooking, and cleaning, and daily chores. There's just this wonderful way that this community has developed around us. And it's something I think that is special about music. It's not the only thing that creates community, but it's a special thing because people come and sit together, and experience music – it's a very social activity to begin with.

Tell us about the Providence String Quartet.

The string quartet is a very essential part of this work. For starters, the group has a very unusual type of residency. It's the only one of its kind in the country, where a group commits itself to living and working permanently in an urban neighborhood and receives its livelihood from being based in a community, or in a neighborhood-based setting like this. Many quartets have university/college residencies, or at a conservatory, where they get salaries and they teach in that environment, and they'd be mentors to young musicians. So, we translated that model into the neighborhood, and said what if we were similarly mentors, teachers and performers but within a neighborhood context. That's how we set up shop.

The room we are sitting in (a storefront on Westminster St, next door to the Community MusicWorks office) is the studio for the quartet. Because it's such in an interesting relationship to the neighborhood, we chose to just post "string quartet" for the sign on our window, and not Providence String Quartet. That's because we want people to understand that it's like a generic thing, like a grocery store, coffee shop, string quartet! – you know, as you walk by, we want people to know that it's a normal part of daily life. To that end, we have a microphone and speakers that go out onto the streets so when we rehearse in here, we can turn that on and as people walk by, they hear what we're doing.

I'm always delighted by the idea that even though the people who pass by our storefront are not our students, that hopefully the young people who see us here will have a very different connection to a string quartet the next time they hear about one. Instead of saying, 'I've never heard of that, that's something weird, it happens somewhere faraway in a concert hall,' they'd instead say, 'Yeah, I have one of those in my neighborhood.' Then we show up in an event, and kids would say, 'Oh yeah, these guys are from my street!' That's the kind of different guise that we like to promote our work in.

Why did you choose to do your work in the West End and Southside?

When I was senior in college, I began teaching a violin student who lived in this neighborhood and sort of got familiar with it. But then, as I started to understand the dynamics of the city, it was clear that these were the most distressed areas of the city. And that's really the priority of Community MusicWorks. The transformative qualities of music education should be really there for the residents who have the least access to resources to begin with.



The other piece of the Providence String Quartet is that when we chose our name, we wanted it to be not only residents and performers from this neighborhood, but also to form a resident ensemble of the city as a whole. We look to be part of occasions in the city that is unusual. I read once before that in a city in Minnesota, they had a string quartet department at city hall! I thought that made a whole lot of sense, especially in this day and age when there's so much emphasis on corporations promoting things. I thought there's something very important about music – music should be not an elitist, or high end aspect

of civic life, but that it should be this completely normal integrated part of city life, and if the city needs an occasion to mourn or to celebrate, we hope they'll think of the Providence String Quartet.

We don't necessarily play background music at cocktail parties, but we play concerts where we feel the music will be meaningful to people, like when we played for an opening at the Gallery at City Hall for an exhibit a few years ago on the neighborhood shrines, the shrines that are erected for victims of violence around the city. To me, it just felt like the perfect setting for us to play. There were people there whose loved ones died from violent crimes. And it felt like such a moment to be able to give to the people in that room.

Even though we do play the sort of "normal" concerts at cities and libraries and concert halls, and so on, it's these performances for specific occasions – especially those for civic occasions, that are really very central to what we're all about.

This Friday and Saturday, your organization, along with the Providence Youth Arts Collaborative, is presenting a conference on "Imagining Art + Social Change." Why is this conference relevant to Providence, and what do you hope to accomplish by hosting this event?

The conference theme is very central to our work, thinking about ways that arts can have an impact on social change. And it's also very central to the work of the partners in the Providence Youth Arts Collaborative, which is comprised of us, Providence Black Rep, CityArts, New Urban Arts, AS220 Broad Street Studio, and Everett Dance Studio.

This is a group that came together four years ago to really think about how we can have more of an impact together than separately as six relatively small nonprofits in the City, that are serving youth through the arts in ways that are focused on youth relationships and are focused on social change, empowering youth through the arts. So, the group has supported each other by sharing resources – information, supplies, or tips on funding sources. We also do collective advocacy for this field, the importance of youth arts work, and we also do some collective fundraising. In other words, what can we do as a group of organizations that none of us can do on our own.

Many times, I've heard people from other cities say to me, 'you know, this is a very unusual situation because in our cities, we're used to fighting tooth-and-nail over every dollar. You people are sitting around the table every month thinking about how to support one another.' So the more we are in touch with each other, the more we know that we're not duplicating efforts. So that's one of the values to Providence of this conference, is to shed light on this collaborative and to promote how effective that can be.

Are the attendees mostly from outside of Providence?

It's a mix – many will come from out of state and other towns. So, it's a great opportunity to shed light on how Providence is a leader in this arena. Some prestigious leaders in the field of arts and social change will also be here, like Maxine Greene – who has been a kind of beacon for me and a lot of others for starting this kind of work. So, we hope those who weren't able to register, will stay tuned. We (both PYAC and Community MusicWorks) will have something to publish after this and we will also be publishing some podcasts from the Saturday session.

Do you ever wish you just pursued a straight-up professional career in classical music?



I don't wish I had pursued a normal career in classical music. What I'm doing I think is far richer. It's not only richer because I get to have relationships with so many interesting people, but there's also a feeling that the work we do in the community, and with youth, and with the other arts organizations, that we're really thinking about some vital community issues. All of this work impacts our music making too. So, as musicians we really need to draw on what happens in the world to make our music meaningful to us and to our audiences. To be so immersed in the issues of our communities, deepens the music we play too.

I have friends who in their straight-up music careers are burnt out. They ask, 'what am I doing this for?' Someone recently said to me, 'I need to change direction because I'm feeding people who are already full and I'm looking for people who are hungry to hear what I have to say.' This person understood that it's not about having a self-sacrificing musical career, it's about making your career that much more meaningful to you and to the people you're playing for.

As a leader of one the thriving arts organization in Providence, where do you see the role of art and music heading in the future of our City?

What's exciting about having been around for a decade is that we're having students who are graduating – moving on to college, or finishing it. As more of a critical mass of our students move through their education, there's a very exciting potential that they will come back to the city and have an impact on the future of Providence. They will be the future residents, the future leaders in another decade or two. What's exciting is that these are young people for whom music and art was very significant in their upbringing.

Providence is already very supportive of the arts although it needs, of course, to be more so. In a sense that Providence has become famous for its art and musical offerings in communities, it's exciting to think that the next generation of leaders in Providence will understand not only the benefits of having a professional arts scene, but also the benefits of a very strong youth arts scene, and what youth arts can do for kid. Whether it's because a young person who made a decision to join our program over joining a gang, because of a sense of belonging and purpose, or that because they could get here what they could've also gotten from gang, but they chose to be here, instead – because of that, we will always need to have a strong youth arts education presence, not only to create more artists, but also to create more creative people to lead this city in the future.

To learn more about Sebastian Ruth and Community MusicWorks, log on to their [website](#), or perhaps take a walk down Westminster Street, where you might catch a rehearsal session of the Providence String Quartet on your way to the local grocery store.