

Can Music Make Us Civil?

***If civility is authentic regard
and respect for others,
how does music
come into it?***

BY Thomas Cabaniss

Announcement of the latest round of MacArthur Fellows last fall brought good news for chamber music. Prominent in the headlines were 37-year-old Latin jazz percussionist Dafnis Prieto and 29-year-old cellist Alisa Weilerstein, both young musicians having a tremendous impact on the performance and creation of new jazz and classical chamber music. A subtler trend, but one truly heartening to teaching artists, was indicated by the naming of two other recent musical MacArthur fellows whose work is defined as much by their mission to educate as by their artistic excellence. Francisco Nuñez (2011), the 46-year-old conductor and founder of the Young People's Chorus of New York City, was selected for redefining the boundaries of the youth chorus and as an advocate for new music. A year earlier, in the 2010 crop of fellows, was 36-year-old Sebastian Ruth, violist of the Providence String Quartet and founder and artistic director of Community MusicWorks, a nonprofit educational center that provides free music education in urban neighborhoods of Providence. (See "Quartet in [Permanent] Residence," *Chamber Music*, May/June 2004.)

This past November, Community MusicWorks, along with the Cogut Center for the Humanities at Brown University, played host to a conference called Music and Civil Society. Sebastian Ruth set out to investigate how music can connect with the

issues finding currency in Occupy Wall Street—social justice, economic equity, community development, and sustainability. Simply put, can music contribute to a more civil society? A number of speakers and guests took the plunge, including conductor/educator Leon Botstein, cultural activist Arlene Goldbard, teaching artist Eric Booth, and the philosopher Maxine Greene.

Maxine Greene is probably the closest thing we teaching artists have to a guru. As a writer and teacher of philosophy at Teachers College, she has been a consistent advocate for children, imagination, and the place of the arts in the lives of young people. At age 94 she is unbowed and unapologetic about her views on the connection between enlightened pedagogy and social justice. Hundreds of teaching artists (and thousands of teachers) were her students at the summer session of the Lincoln Center Institute, and her writings have been a particular influence on Sebastian Ruth.

Invited to Providence for the conference, Greene was unable to travel, so Ruth made a YouTube-style video of her and played it during the event. (It is posted on the December 2, 2011, edition of the Community MusicWorks blog: <http://communitymusicworks.typepad.com>.) A somewhat free-wheeling little homemade video, it is nonetheless remarkable. Slumped in her chair, with oxygen tubes clipped to her nose, Greene addresses the themes of civil



Phase III students of Community MusicWorks in Providence, RI, are the program's most committed participants. They play chamber music, rehearse and receive coachings; and several Phase III members have served on CMW's board of directors.

justice and the arts while peppering her remarks with references to Lady Gaga. She is also able to articulate her view that the arts are an arena in which people can develop authentic regard for one another, creating community and civility. She challenges us to see that developing ourselves as citizens is an always-incomplete process, and that civil society is something always in the making, never fully achieved. She likens this to music, an art that is also always in the making. Music, she reminds us, does not end when the music is written down, nor when the last note sounds.

So perhaps music is a process that mirrors civil society in its beautiful incompleteness, but can music *make us more civil*? Can it help Palestinians and Israelis communicate with one another? Can it save children from poverty in Venezuela? For that matter, can it save children from poverty in the United States? Leon Botstein, music director of the American Symphony Orchestra and president of Bard College, says, "Who knows? Perhaps." But he worries that sometimes as a field we get carried away with exaggerated

claims for our art. We think of music as a tonic or as a "force for good," when in fact it is simply an art with its own universal but abstract language. Music, Botstein says, can be used for good or ill. It is too rich a discipline to be saddled with unsubstantiated claims of social benefit.

When Botstein cited examples of how music was misused by Hitler and Stalin, he began to ruffle feathers in the conference crowd—a group clearly intent upon celebrating and examining the good work being done in the intersection of music and social justice by groups like Community MusicWorks and El Sistema USA. But for Sebastian Ruth, Botstein's critique was clear-eyed and useful.

"I didn't think Leon Botstein's comments were troubling," said Ruth in a post-conference interview, "He was saying don't overglorify, don't oversimplify. It increases our sense of responsibility. We have to consider every choice we make carefully. It's something we have been working on really hard here in Providence over the last fifteen years."

At Community MusicWorks (CMW), where Sebastian Ruth and his colleagues teach string students in Providence, the basic curriculum is pretty much what you might expect from a place that teaches instrumental music: private lessons, ensemble playing, study of theory and composition, performances with lots of practice leading up to the big moments for kids in front of friends and family. What's different is that CMW is surrounded family participation and support, making its programs a much sought-after opportunity in a where the average household income is \$21,000 and the official poverty rate is 42 percent.

The number of kids in CMW's free after-school program has risen steadily—from 15 students in 1997 to 110 in 2010. This, plus the program's remarkable 90 percent-plus retention rate, makes for a long waiting list—and prompted the Providence String Quartet to add a fellowship program that has expanded its teaching faculty. And the program has been cited as inspiration for a number of other civic-minded ensembles, such as the Haven String Quartet in New

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Haven, CT, and the Boston Public Quartet. CMW may be small, but its influence is growing.

Perhaps most significant and unusual are CMW's Phase II and Phase III, curricula created to address the needs of the program's growing population of teenagers and young adults. In addition to their lessons and ensemble activities, the teens in CMW meet regularly in close-knit peer groups to—in Sebastian's words—"discuss important issues in their lives and their communities." In other words, Phase II is where teens practice citizenship, where they learn to develop authentic regard for others. CMW's teaching artists are quite explicit about this this attempt to fuse musical learning with an education in citizenship and community, believing that the two pursuits can be mutually illuminating and reinforcing.

The more Sebastian Ruth talked about Phase II, the more I realized that it was his subtle, sophisticated response to the question that others had skated over. Perhaps, as Leon Botstein asserted, being involved with music—even something as collaborative as chamber music—cannot in itself make us more civil; but there is nothing saying that music cannot be meaningfully interwoven with the quest for a more civil society. As Ruth says,

It's not that music ... has unique potential. If what we are after is introducing young people to new definitions of musicianship, looking to engage with

ideas of the day, looking to make it powerful for musicians and their audiences, then this combination of linking your musical learning with a sense of public awareness of bigger themes ... is a good way.... to intensify your expressiveness as an artist.

That is not to say that, during his fifteen years of pioneering work in Providence, Ruth hasn't been troubled by questions of his own. Growth wasn't easy, he said, especially because "we didn't sharpen our definitions when it came to what it meant to be an individual in a community. It took us a while to figure that out."

Now he wonders, is CMW's work in an urban New England setting transferable to other settings with very different conditions and political climates? Would it make sense in the Middle East? Would it make sense in a conservative rural setting? Is the work community-specific? Is it innately left-wing or right-wing? Did it grow out of the urban neighborhoods of Providence because of a particular hunger for music among parents and kids at a certain moment? Or do the principles apply across geographic and political boundaries?

I asked Sebastian how musical learning could help in fulfilling Maxine Greene's challenge to help kids develop "mutual and authentic regard" for one another. "Feeding people," he says. "I'm not kidding." He is referring to CMW's "performance parties," which are not just the kids' recitals, but the family-centered, multi-ethnic potluck dinners that accompany them. "We have realized how important it is for music not to exist in isolation but as part of community rituals, part of community life. The practical stuff matters."

Another of CMW's nonmusical concerns is inclusiveness in the decision-making. "If we are going to make a change in our Phase II curriculum," says Ruth, "we don't just discuss it among ourselves, we ask the kids in

Phase II, and they become not just a voice, but part of the decision, too. That goes for lessons, as well. We try to involve kids in how their lessons are being taught. We are sharing what we know with someone who has their knowledge, too, and we try to make space for each person's contribution."

Making space for each person's contribution is certainly a crucial step in fostering authentic mutual regard, in nurturing kinship among citizens. As Maxine Greene reminds us, as members of a democracy we do not have to agree, but each of us can develop a respect for the other's humanity. We can acknowledge the varied ways in which individuals are trying to find their place in the world. As Leon Botstein says, one of the ways we develop ourselves as humans is through the language of music.

Finally, I asked Sebastian Ruth what kind of difference he thought CMW had made in the lives of children and families and musicians over the fifteen years of its existence.

It's like holistic medicine—you are not made better instantaneously, but you are doing a lot of things, girding your system to be able to respond better in the future. Our involvement doesn't stop with teaching them as kids, but it extends into college and beyond. How has their work with us changed their worldview? How has music impacted their futures? I am really fascinated by that.

Careful not to overclaim, but deftly weaving civility and music together, a string quartet's bold urban experiment goes on.

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