

Transforming the lives of musicians

Uncovering new paths through CMW's Fellowship Program

By Chloë Kline, with Rachel Panitch, Arlyn Valencia, Jason Amos,
and Adrienne Taylor

In 2006, Community MusicWorks, a non-profit after school music performance and education organization in the West End of Providence, RI, instituted a Fellowship Program to introduce young professional musicians to its “storefront string quartet” model.¹ The Fellowship Program was created to answer a dual need for Community MusicWorks: to share the organization’s resident string quartet model, which had been receiving increasing attention from musicians and educators across the country, and to address the organization’s long (and growing) waiting list of students. Successful applicants spend two years with the organization – teaching, performing, learning the ins and outs of the West End community, completing administrative rotations, and thinking deeply about community-based classical music careers.

I was a member of the first class of fellows, from 2006–2008. I came to the program by a circuitous route; a graduate of the Shepherd School of Music, I played in a professional string quartet for several years outside of Chicago before returning to my home city of Boston. By the end of two years, I became disillusioned with life in a string quartet: while I still believed the quartet repertoire was some of the most interesting and compelling music out there, I felt frustrated with the shallowness of the connections I was experiencing through music. During concert after concert I looked for evidence that our work in the quartet (hours of discussion about the most beautiful way to play one particular

¹ Community MusicWorks programs are based around the permanent residency of the Providence String Quartet, whose members live and work in the West End and South Side of Providence. The quartet rehearses in a storefront on a main thoroughfare in the West End, and quartet members teach and mentor students in the surrounding neighborhoods. CMW also offers opportunities for students to attend concerts in Providence and beyond, learn from visiting musicians in monthly workshops, and join a teen group that explores the relationship between music and social justice.

phrase, weeks of rehearsals to perfect one movement of a Beethoven string quartet) was reaching somebody. Audience members clearly enjoyed our efforts, and were even sometimes much moved. But I was looking for something more... was there a way that string quartet music could *change* somebody's life? At the time, I felt that the answer must be yes, but I could not find the way to do it, and in the end I left the quartet.

After returning to Boston, I took a prolonged break from string quartet music, and eventually found my way to the Arts in Education masters program at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. Several writing and research projects from my year at Harvard were focused on Community MusicWorks, whose innovative blend of string quartet music and social justice programming, together with the model of a string quartet that lived and worked in an under-served inner-city neighborhood, seemed to address the very concerns that had pushed me out of the string quartet world. In 2006 I took the leap back into that world by joining the inaugural class of CMW's Fellowship Program.

CMW's mission is to *"create a cohesive urban community through music education and performance that transforms the lives of children, families, and musicians."* After two years of teaching and mentoring my students, working closely with their families, and performing concerts for and with the community, I have a growing understanding of how string quartets *can* change lives. I see this most clearly through the student string quartet that I now coach every week at CMW, as they uncover the joys and challenges of playing in a string quartet. I also see evidence of this in the workshops and performance parties at Community MusicWorks, where an advanced student playing the Telemann concerto for the first time, and a second year student performing an improvisation to Twinkle both receive standing ovations from their parents, friends, and teachers. I see this also in the spaghetti dinners and concerts that the Providence String Quartet performs in the neighborhood, sometimes collaborating with their students, sometimes with world-renowned string quartets more used to performing on the world's major concert stages.

Currently, I'm interested in ways that this experience can be shared with others in the classical music world who struggle with the same dilemma that I felt, and who are looking for ways to weave their performance careers more deeply into the fabric of a community. One way to do this, I believe, is to share the stories of other musicians who have come to the fellowship program, in the hopes that their perspectives can help others struggling with these questions, or offer insights to organizations looking to create opportunities for musicians (or artists) to experience community-based work. Over the past several months, I have been speaking to the current fellows at CMW – violinists Arlyn Valencia and Rachel Panitch, violist Jason Amos, and cellist Adrienne Taylor – about their experiences before and during the program. What led them to Community MusicWorks? What did they find at the program? And how has it changed their plans for their careers?

Their responses demonstrate several trends. Like me, the members of the current fellowship classes feel a deep need to incorporate some form of service into their careers, to broaden the scope of their musicianship and create lasting connections in a community. Many bring considerable teaching and performing experience, all of which adds immeasurably to the CMW community, and some have already experienced fulfilling work in a community that has left them hungry to build more of these connections into their career. They are *eager* for this opportunity, and often thrilled to discover that there is already a community of people doing this work. They are committed, serious individuals, who immediately respond to the commitment of their colleagues. And while (like me) they don't necessarily arrive at CMW with a clear sense of where this work will take them, they're grateful for the opportunity to explore this model more deeply, and think about ways to make it their own.

What does the program offer these musicians? Fellows are immersed in a three-pronged experience that emphasizes community-based teaching, performing, and the administrative work that supports each of these endeavors, and all say

that the opportunity to learn about this model through doing the actual work is invaluable. The prolonged work in the community allows fellows to learn not only from colleagues, but also from their students, from parents, from Board members, and from members of the extended community. Both the daily tasks of running the program and the philosophy behind the tasks are treated with equal seriousness and commitment, and this opportunity to both practice the work and to explore the underlying philosophy gives the fellows the grounding and flexibility to imagine new contexts for this work. Each fellow is asked to present an alternative model of CMW at the end of their first year. While it's often challenging to come up with a new model by this point, articulating these ideas, and building upon them in their second years, allows fellows to lay the groundwork for new possibilities for their own careers after Community MusicWorks.

The desire to serve

CMW Fellows come to the program from careers as professional musicians, as well as right from school. They have varying degrees of teaching and performing experience, but all cite this unanswered need in their lives to make a difference with their music.

I came to CMW because it sounded like the perfect job. For years I had been trying to reconcile my desire to play chamber music with my desire to do something to help people. The staff at CMW was the only group of people that I knew that were making a living playing in a string quartet whose main goal was to serve a community. – **Adrienne Taylor '10**

This Fellowship seemed like it would tap into all of my passions—teaching, performing, learning, getting involved in a community—and open up a whole world of possibilities that I had not previously imagined in my career. – **Arlyn Valencia '09**

I really believe that people should use their gifts not just to gain profit for just themselves, but to make as positive of an impact as possible within their community and beyond. This is why CMW has been such a good fit in my world view. – **Jason Amos '10**

This need for community may not be universal among classically trained musicians. I believe, though, that there is a growing awareness of the importance of the role that strong community bonds can play in the life of musicians – and vice versa – and that the traditional career paths for classical musicians don't often capitalize on this possibility. Many of the Fellows talk about the immediate excitement, the quickening of the pulse they felt when they first heard about CMW, and the details of the fellowship position. There's an almost instant recognition: *this* is what I'm missing in my career.

I visited CMW's website and the Fellowship position leapt off the screen at me. – **Rachel Panitch '09**

When I first read the job description, I had to do a double take, because I thought, "this is too good to be true." – **AV**

That was probably the first time in my life that I saw an opportunity and acted immediately. – **AT**

Often, CMW fellows come to the program having already been immersed in performing careers, but the possibility of continuing a high level of performing, while embedding themselves deeply into the life of a community, is new, and strikes a chord.

Finding a supportive community

Community MusicWorks Fellows frequently mention how important it is to feel supported in community-based work – both in terms of having colleagues who share their beliefs and understand the challenges inherent in the work, and also in terms of having an organization that can offer them basic support (health care, an adequate living stipend).

I was struck by the way the organization works to meet the needs of not only the community it serves, but also the needs of its staff members by providing healthcare to its employees and space for a nursery upstairs. I was so impressed by this that it made me think that this is the way every organization should be. – **AT**

This organizational support is critical (especially in today's uncertain economic climate), and it's also smart. Having health insurance and other basic needs taken

care of allows CMW musicians to keep their focus on the neighborhood, and gives them time to continue to work at their teaching and performing to keep both at the highest level. The support from colleagues is no less important; the work at CMW can be difficult and at times discouraging, and knowing that your colleagues understand your experience and are there to support you when necessary helps to smooth the path.

I was immediately struck by the hard-working, dedicated, positive, supportive “CMW vibe” among the staff and how infectious it felt. This vibe eventually served to extinguish any nervousness I had felt in the beginning weeks. – **AV**

I find myself continually praising the intense dedication of the people I work with, the high quality of musicianship, and the unfailing commitment to the mission. This dedication makes such a difference in the day to day work of the program. – **RP**

This support goes both ways: members of the full-time quartet at CMW have also mentioned how helpful it is to have others joining them in this work, citing both tangible and intangible benefits to the fellows’ participation. On the one hand, simply having more individuals making a commitment to CMW’s vision is an emotional support. In addition, the fellows have allowed the organization to address its long waiting list, and also help make the central program events (concert trips, workshops, etc.) run more smoothly. CMW’s organizational culture stresses ongoing reflection and improvement, and the fellows, with fresh perspectives on and new approaches to the work, are often able to suggest and implement improvements to programs and workflow.

To cite only two examples, fellow Arlyn Valencia has redesigned the stage-crew protocols for CMW Performance Parties, creating an easier and more streamlined performance flow; and fellow Rachel Panitch, after watching staff struggle to provide a hot and nutritious dinner for Phase 2 participants, enlisted the help of a volunteer chef from Johnson & Wales University – saving the program money while also improving the quality of the food, and increasing the students’ awareness of good nutrition habits.

“It’s not a teaching gig...”

When most of my colleagues hear about my fellowship position at CMW, their immediate reaction is to congratulate me on my “teaching gig.” I feel obligated to correct them. While teaching is a large part of what I do in Providence, the program is so much more involved. Often times my friends ask exactly what I did that day, and sometimes the response is “I made sure the students were where they needed to be. Oh, and I filled about 150 juice cups. Oh, and then I led a conversation about how poverty often prevents access to proper nutrition.” This is a far cry from the image of soloing with orchestras that many of us have for our careers after NEC, but after I explain the full extent of the work here, my colleagues are always blown away at how a vehicle for social justice can be so cleverly disguised as a music program. They are also surprised, as was I, at how much work must be done to make things run smoothly! – JA

Learn through doing

The central benefit of the Fellowship Program is the deep grounding in the practical work of CMW. Stage one in this “learning through doing” experience is surprise (verging on shock) at the amount of work, and the varied types of work, that make CMW hum. From soliciting ads for the annual program book, to reading lists for monthly seminars, to arranging and re-arranging the spaces used for workshops and performances, to the daily work of teaching and performing, the workload can at times feel daunting. (Luckily, it also can quickly feel rewarding.)

I arrived at orientation with wide eyes, high expectations, and a moderate amount of apprehension. I had no choice but to hit the ground running, tackling new tasks like soliciting for program book advertisements, taking on 15 new beginning violin students, figuring out how to exist as a “real-world” citizen, and laying the foundation for relationships with my new colleagues. – AV

I didn’t realize before coming to CMW that I would be involved in so many activities outside of teaching and playing. Also, at first I didn’t know how I would feel teaching so many students, especially those who were younger than students I was used to teaching. – AT

The next stage in the learning through doing process is more gradual, unfolding month by month over the time that the fellows spend at Community

MusicWorks. Over the course of the first year, fellows learn how to balance on the three-legged stool of teaching, performing and administration. They strengthen each aspect of their work, in the process learning the ways in which each element can reinforce the others. Fellows also build roots in the community, establishing strong connections with their students, and developing a deeper understanding of the many facets of the concept of community in the CMW model and how each connects to the other.

The longer I am here the better I understand the importance of the sense of community the students feel with each other. Community MusicWorks is a safe, tolerant space in which young people can learn and feel free to express themselves. – **AT**

“The answer is always yes.”

*I have been surprised again and again by the staff’s ability to recognize the real challenges faced by Community MusicWorks families, coupled with an unfailing dedication to connect with each individual student. The ‘mentor’ part of teacher-mentor is always on the brains of the staff. This manifests itself in so many ways: from individual phone calls before events, to the offer to occasionally drive students to those events, to ordering extra pizza at the end of a performance party to make sure no one goes home hungry, to upholding high expectations in order that students get the full value of our programming. No matter how many challenges a student faces, there is never a question of whether or not learning the cello as a part of this community is a worthwhile, positive force in that student’s life. The answer is always ‘yes.’ Sometimes we wish we could provide even more, but we never doubt that being a part of CMW plays a role in balancing out the scales of opportunity, of healthy relationship-building, and of empowerment. – **RP***

Opening up new possibilities

One of the main goals of the Fellowship Program is to help musicians think about ways in which the CMW model might be applied to other places, or populations, or types of music. The monthly seminar series provides opportunities for the entire staff (as well as Board and community members) to gather and discuss elements of the program, and the series culminates each year in a presentation by each of the first year fellows on an ‘alternative model’ that they’ve been thinking about. These models have included programs to introduce

conservatory and college musicians to community-based performance and teaching careers, a folk arts education center, an after-school electronic music program, and a health services organization for musicians.

The fellowship seminars have spurred a flood of new ideas and questions about what kind of project I would like to be a part of in the future. – **AT**

Coming up with a model by the end of the first year of the fellowship program is incredibly challenging. I myself initially felt unequipped to make the leap from internalizing the CMW model to imagining a new version of the program in another setting, and several other fellows have agreed that articulating a new version of CMW is challenging on several levels.

Even by the end of a full year at CMW, I had to struggle to articulate a plan for my post-fellowship career path. While my first year helped to crystallize my interests and values, I didn't know how I would continue to follow them somewhere else. – **RP**

Before moving to Providence I was secretly dreaming about how I could play in a string quartet and at the same time do something to make the world a better place. All of my ideas for ways to do that seemed so improbable though, that I was even afraid to share my thoughts with others. – **AT**

Gradually, however, fellows begin to uncover a path that speaks to them, trying out ideas on other staff members, or bringing new ideas to CMW that they may then expand into a vision of a sister program. Fellow Rachel Panitch, for example, began a "fiddle lab" at CMW in the fall of 2007 building on her love of New England fiddle music, and this class has helped her conceive of a new model of a neighborhood fiddler-in-residence.

Halfway through my second year, I've been surprised in one of my own brainstorms to find myself thrilled with a plan that resembles the CMW model more closely than anything I had previously imagined. Nothing about this plan is tangible yet, but with every person I share it with, it becomes more real. – **RP**

“An incredible sense of accomplishment”

Rachel and I have been given the opportunity to organize and lead the first CMW Summer Program. Through this project, we are learning by doing; since the fall, we have been brainstorming, strategizing, budgeting, working on grant proposals, collaborating with an artist-in-residence and other PYAC organizations. It's been a long process, and an exciting challenge for us, and I have a feeling that after launching this program and sewing it successfully into the CMW fabric, we will be filled with an incredible sense of accomplishment. – AV

Thinking big

Fellows consistently talk about the importance of having the time, resources, and guidance to think through these models, and to try out elements of them within the framework of CMW. Whether or not participants emerge from the program with a perfectly polished business plan, the opportunity to plan and dream in the context of a working program is an invaluable step on each fellow's path.

The best thing the staff did for me at this point, was not to lay on the pressure to come up with something 'realistic', but to support me in even my vaguest, most dreamy of plans. – RP

In a meeting that I requested, members of Community MusicWorks were able to further help me develop my ideas for the future. Even more important, they gave me the feeling that what I was imagining was actually possible. – AT

CMW has helped to open my scope of what I think is possible as a musician. I'm still not sure exactly what type of performing career I'll pursue; however, I *am* sure that it will include work stemming from my personal beliefs and the values instilled in me during my fellowship at Community MusicWorks. – JA

In addition to the seminar series, CMW incorporates practice retreats for all staff members. This week, free of teaching, performance or administrative duties

allows staff to hone in on a certain element (or elements) of their work – choosing a technical or artistic goal to focus on, or often in the case of the fellows, working on plans or visions for the future.

CMW has provided me with an environment in which to explore, think big, reflect, plan, and make important decisions. For instance, this past week I utilized my practice retreat to reflect on why I love teaching, how I approach teaching, and what I want to leave my students with as they move forward next year with another teacher. – **AV**

“New ideas for the future”

*Being a fellow at Community Music Works has given me many new ideas about what possibilities there are for a future playing chamber music and serving a community. Before coming here I had ideas about how I might help people through music, but now I have been introduced to a model which is probably closer to what I would like to be a part of than any of the ideas I had imagined previously. I have seen the value of being a real part of the community being served, of forming a sense of community among the students within the organization, and of maintaining a small organization that is able to meet the needs of each family that it serves as well as the needs of each team member it employs. – **AT***

Fellowship through fellowship

The benefit of the Fellowship Program for graduates is immense, allowing them to incorporate elements of the CMW model in their careers (whether this involves teaching, performing, or something entirely different) after the program. The benefit to the CMW community is also far-reaching, as the fellows in residence help CMW achieve its goals in Providence, and also bring elements of their own traditions and vision to enrich the CMW experience. And, finally, the Fellowship Program benefits the wider classical music community.

When I graduated from the Fellowship program, I was given a plaque congratulating me on completing the program, and welcoming me to the “fellowship of musicians working together to achieve social change.” CMW’s Fellowship program is building, step by step, a larger community of musicians, in Providence and beyond, who believe that performing at a high level is only

the first step in a fulfilling musical career, who conceive of teaching as both an act of social justice and a way to augment their own musicality, and who endeavor to practice their art as an act of both hope and defiance. I can only hope that in the years ahead (especially in this age of a renewed commitment to service) that this community continues to grow deeper, stronger, and ever more connected. If it takes after Community MusicWorks, the community from which it springs, this deepening is assured.

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