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Shelter Music Boston Brings Classical Music to Homeless Shelters

A little Mozart can go a long way.

By Thomas Onacki | Arts & Entertainment | August 13, 2014 4:30 p.m.

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A unique business model for social change is taking place in the Boston area. When they are not performing at venues such as Symphony Hall, a group of professional musicians have discovered a way to support themselves financially and take part in an innovative social service. Since 2010, Shelter Music Boston has been bringing their classical chamber music to residents at homeless and wellness shelters.

Three full-time members of the group make up the core of Shelter Music Boston, with a few musicians who play on occasion. Violinist Julie Leven, the executive and artistic director, started the organization four years ago due to a lack of musical jobs at the time. She was working on an organic farm with Rebecca Strauss, a violist and violinist in the group, when the two began discussing the state of their musical careers.

“We started talking about the fact that there was not much work in the freelance classical music world,” Strauss said. “There were so many financial cutbacks that musicians were losing work left and right, and I was most definitely one of them.”

It was on a frigid winter day in December 2009 when Leven read a newspaper article about a woman in New York City playing music in homeless shelters. “That’s it! We need that in Boston. I am going to make that happen,” she said. Leven amassed a group of musicians and then contacted Elizabeth Condron, who was working at the Pine Street Inn Shattuck Shelter in Jamaica Plain at the time.

“The very first time we went, I was a little bit nervous and didn’t know how we would be received, and neither did anyone else, including the people who worked there,” said Shelter Music Boston violinist Julia McKenzie.

Now, four years later, the group is playing at seven homeless and wellness shelters, including Crittenton Women’s Union, Dimock Center, Caspar Emergency Shelter, Community Day Center Waltham, and Pine Street Inn’s Men’s Inn, Women’s Inn, and Shattuck Shelter.

At Dimock Center in Roxbury, in a program supporting women post-detox, I witnessed two worlds colliding. The center has a large and tranquil campus of castle-esque late 19th-century buildings. It sits atop a hill, overlooking the lives that these women once lived, and in the distance toward the horizon, the lives that they are soon to lead.

Shelter Music Boston’s performance was not like going to a classical concert at a traditional venue where you sit in your seat and clap at the end. It was highly interactive and a learning experience for those at the center. Pausing in between each musical piece, the musicians allot time to discuss the many different composers or inform the residents about their instruments. The audience asked questions and shared their own thoughts and feelings.

“The point of our shelter concerts is not just the performance,” Leven said. “The performance is the starting point for the interaction, the education, the community building, and creating a respectful environment for people to feel more human.”

Along with the audience involvement, the musicians’ dedication to the shelter residents is also integral to their effectiveness. Strauss explained, “The residents who are in the shelter for multiple months, or sometimes years, know us. Stability and consistency are important so that they know there are people in this world who care enough to come back every single month.”

The Pine Street Men’s and Women’s Inns in the South End of Boston hosts crowds of homeless men and women. The two shelters sit side by side and are surrounded by renovated restaurants and brownstones. The exterior of the shelters put on the façade of old brick factories, while the interior resembles a typical high school. The walls in the hallways are lined with lockers, the cafeteria is large, and the residents congregate in groups, chatting like high school students in between class periods.

Shelter Music Boston performs in the cafeteria, and the concerts, similar to those at Dimock Center, include plenty of audience participation. One man during a concert transcended the barriers of appropriate etiquette for a classical performance. He yelled things like, “This is hot!” and “I’ve never heard anything like this—this is cool!”

“He was responding, and no one has ever told him it was wrong, that you don’t yell at a classical concert. It was fine that he did that. It was cool for me as a performer. In jazz they clap all the time, and in rock and roll they’re screaming, so what’s wrong with this?” Ms. Leven reflected. “Afterward he came up to me and said very quietly, ‘You gave me back my heart and soul.’ I will never forget this man. This is why I became a musician. For this moment, this one guy.”

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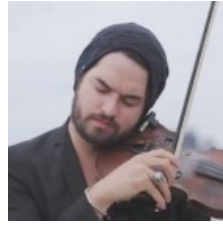
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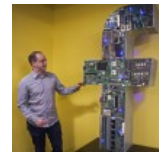
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