

Worcester Mag | The Alternative Source for News - Art - Dining - Nightlife Worcester, MA

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Gift of music for at-risk youth

Originally printed at <http://www.worcestermag.com/newsletter-stories/weekend/Gift-of-music-for-at-risk-youth-215856301.html>

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July 18, 2013

Above: The Boston Conservatory Honors String Quartet. Photo submitted

The perception of the classical music scene does not depict a lively one. It is not uncommon for the genre to be considered stuffy and for an older and wealthier crowd of elitists. However, the Worcester Chamber Music Society (WCMS) is making leaps and bounds in removing that stigma. Forming a new partnership with Bridging the Gap, the two organizations will team up to provide high-risk youth with the opportunity to learn and rehearse with a pre-professional string quartet from the renowned Boston Conservatory and share the stage for a concluding concert.

Bursting onto the classical music scene in 2006, the WCMS has spent the past seven years not only performing for the Worcester adult community, but garnering younger audience members, as well. Partnered with Clark University, WCMS created Neighborhood Strings - a program that offers free music lessons to students residing in the Main South area. Having been well-received, recently being recognized for the Emilia Peabody Foundation and awarded a \$10,000 grant, WCMS began to make further strides to bring classical music to the younger generations of Worcester.

Receiving direction from lead corporate sponsor Bay State Savings Bank, WCMS first came in touch with Bridging the Gap – one of the city’s social services organizations. Bridging the Gap, led by Amanda Thompson, is a 12-week life skill training Salvation Army program for high-risk teens, many of whom are state-mandated to be there. “After meeting with Amanda and learning more about the needs of her teens and where they are currently on their journeys towards obtaining constructive means for managing anger, speaking up and taking positive actions towards change, it was clear to me that music may be another useful tool for them to explore and [possibly] add to their ‘life skills toolbox,’” explains Krista Buckland Reisner, Summer Festival & Camp director and Business Development director for WCMS.

With WCMS’s Summer Festival & Camp for musicians, those attending have the honor of learning from Helen Lee, David Do, John Batchelder and Bryon Hogan, all from the

Boston Conservatory acting in WCMS's fellowship ensemble-in-residence position. Showing a distinct interest to bringing music to kids in unconventional ways, Reisner realized a way to connect with Thompson's Bridging the Gap program. During the camp, the Boston Conservatory Honors String Quartet will meet with adolescents from Bridging the Gap four times to work on the basics of music construction, including rhythm, melody, mood/color and storytelling. "These fundamental building blocks of music can be explored with kids who have no prior musical training or knowledge as these are inherently in all of human beings, whether we actively know it or not," explains Reisner.

The quartet will work with those from Bridging the Gap to craft a short improvisational piece to present on stage at the Summer Festival & Camp's final student concert on July 19 at Clark University's Razzo Hall. Including the improv piece that the Bridging the Gap participants will create is a natural extension of what is already done with WCMS students. "These two improv groups ... will show that the art of improvisation can be approached from opposite sides of the coin. Hopefully this will produce an effect that is even greater than the stand-alone pieces, not only for all the young budding musicians performing in the concert, but our audience," Reisner says.

This union epitomizes a facet of WCMS's mission - to teach life skills of personal responsibility, ownership and creative thinking through the study of chamber music. "The inspiration behind our partnership is based on the value of hope, the universality of the human condition and the commonality of music as a way of constructively giving voice to our struggles, frustrations, dreams and desires for positive change in the world," says Reisner.

WCMS's goal to change the longlasting perception that classical music is for richer, older white people, will be met by joining forces with Bridging the Gap. Reisner and her team, while acknowledging ridding the public's mind of the stereotype will take time, are committed to bringing their music to people on their own terms. "This requires that we listen to what they want and need, learn where we can be useful to them and then create programs and atmospheres that eliminate as many barriers to entry as possible."

In that vein, this year at WCMS's Summer Festival & Camp young musicians are working on tunes by popular favorites such as Bob Marley and Jimi Hendrix, and an improv group using Klezmer and Indian-classical music as a base. "The goal with including these styles of music in a classical chamber music camp is to help our own kids break out of some of the training they have had and free them up as they work towards personal expression," says Reisner. In turn, she explains, this influences the students' approach to classical works and allows them to really own the pieces.

"This is particularly important in a city like Worcester, which has thriving ethnic communities including Latino, Vietnamese, Albanian and Haitian. Each of these groups

have their own musical heritages, traditions, current trends. While WCMS happens to play the classic music of Western Europe, other cultures have their own classic music, too,” says Reisner.

In the end, it all comes down to sharing the universal gift of music. “Our goal is to put forth the idea that music is music, no matter what form it is in or where it comes from.”

Witness budding musicians making their mark at the final student concert on Friday, July 19 at 3 p.m. at Razzo Hall at Clark University. For more information of WCMS, visit worcesterchambermusic.org.