

# Reaching out

Making music in schools, prisons and day-care centres brings challenges – and also rewards. **Katherine Millett** finds out how young string players connect with children, the elderly, the infirm and the disadvantaged

A young cellist and pianist stood backstage in a large hall ready to play their first outreach concert. As the two students peered around the curtain, they could see rows and rows of empty seats and about 20 seniors sitting in the back. They prepared to walk onstage.

Suddenly, a woman in her 60s pranced up to them, beaming with enthusiasm and sparkling with hundreds of blue and silver sequins sewn to her dress. A crystal tiara lay on her bleached hair, and a banner across her front proclaimed her to be 'Ms Senior Massachusetts'.

'We'll be doing this together!' she gushed to the startled students. 'I'll start with something fun, maybe a number from *Wicked*, then do a little *Cats*. I'll turn it over to you – what's the name of your band? – to play a few songs, do a sing-along, whatever you like. I think music's super, don't you?'

Now what would you do?

(a) Pack up and go home.  
(b) Pretend she isn't there and stick to your plan.  
(c) Wish you had taken a module in improv theatre.  
(d) Wait until she finishes singing, then tell the audience, 'If Mendelssohn could have written words as witty as those, he might have. Wasn't she great? But instead he wrote the music we're about to play. It's called *Song Without Words*.'

This actually happened to two students from Boston's New England Conservatory (NEC). 'We went right ahead with our programme,' says pianist Eriko Nagai. 'As you can imagine, we were making a lot of

eye contact with our teachers in the audience, but we just carried right along! We introduced each piece with excerpts and explanations. The audience reacted surprisingly well. It was actually very liberating to play in a nice, big hall with not much pressure and a small audience that appreciated the music.'

More and more conservatoires are challenging – even requiring – students to go out and perform in the community, usually for small audiences with limited previous exposure to classical music. At the Royal Academy of Music in London, every student must perform publicly at least once before graduating. The Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, requires all students taking chamber music classes to play out twice a year, once for children and once for adults. The NEC books 220 students outside every year and requires all of its honours ensembles to take part. Popular settings include schools, centres for at-risk youths, hospitals, homes for adults with disabilities, libraries, museums and historic landmarks.

Conservatoires are hiring faculty to teach students how to relate to different audiences. Overseeing chamber music and outreach at Eastman is the Ying Quartet, which did pioneering work in the 1990s, spending two years teaching and performing chamber music in the farming town of Jessup, Iowa.

'We had to ask ourselves why a farmer in Jessup should care about Shostakovich,' says violist Phillip Ying, 'and that forced us to articulate what we loved about the music. Now we teach our students to ask themselves what they love most about a particular piece and how they can describe that to an audience.'



A participant on the Musique et Santé programme in France soothes a baby with a double bass



A young player hands her instrument over to an eager listener during a Live Music Now session

DAN BRADY



PHILIPPE BOUTELLOU, MUSIQUE ET SANTÉ

### Use your creativity

'Some students are frightened by outreach work, and others can't wait to do it,' says Michelle Robinson, who works with students at Manchester's Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM). 'My main aim is to help them tap into their creativity. We tend to assume music students are creative, but classical training can make them focus too much on the notes. They also need to think about what the audience wants to hear.'

Holly Marland, also on the faculty at the RNCM, suggests creating a story around the music to dash the idea that classical music is remote and stuffy. She directs Music for Health, part of a European network of programmes, including Musique et Santé in Paris, that connects musicians with patients in hospitals.

'When you're playing at someone's bedside in a hospital, you try to reach them emotionally,' she says. 'Understanding the power of music and its therapeutic benefits can be very liberating. It makes you worry less about yourself and think more about the listener.'

This is not to minimise the importance of sound technique and musicianship. Students are expected to perform at their highest level, but also to connect with people who are new to classical music. The musical landscape is changing.

'Maybe there are still some students who thrive on hours and hours of practice in their darkened cells,' says Tanya Maggi, outreach director at the NEC. 'But that's not what I see. Holing oneself up for four years isn't the mindset any more. Young musicians want to make a difference in the lives of others. I see this more and more every year.' >



COURTESY EASTMAN SCHOOL OF MUSIC

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An Eastman School of Music student is centre stage in the classroom

### Choose the right music

As part of its outreach work, the award-winning Jupiter Quartet played at a juvenile detention centre in Texas. First, the players had to undergo background checks. On the day of the concert, their instruments were searched by prison guards. Finally, they were ushered into a room where there were about 100 young people, aged 12 to 16. Girls sat along one wall, boys along the other.

'They listened,' says cellist Dan McDonough. 'We played Shostakovich's Quartet no.8, which is really tough music, but they were great. We talked about how he was forced to join the Communist Party, considered suicide, and worked out all these horrible circumstances in his music. They were better listeners than the guards, that's for sure. They especially loved the second movement – fast and furious.'

Choosing music to suit the audience is part of the art, says Morgan Szymanski, a 27-year-old guitarist whose flourishing career got its start with Live Music Now, the programme founded in 1977 by Yehudi Menuhin. It selects young music graduates by audition and sends them all over Britain to play, according to its mission statement, 'for people who might otherwise be excluded through disability, disadvantage, ill-health, poverty, geographical isolation or imprisonment'.

'Choose repertoire that is relaxing and bright,' Szymanski advises. 'Short pieces are best. Build up enough repertoire so that you can decide at the moment what to play, depending on the reaction you get.'

### Play it by ear

'And practise playing by ear,' Szymanski adds. 'If a kid wants to hear something from *Star Wars*, or an old person sings you an old English tune and wants you to play it, you

have to be able to work it out on the spot. They don't care if you make a mistake, and they don't want you to be the fastest scale-playing violinist in the world. They want you to interact with them.'

The Mavron Quartet, based in Cardiff, Wales, responds to audience requests by either 'busking' an improvisation on the spot or, if only one member knows the tune, by letting that person play solo to accompany the singing. 'People usually appreciate that you are trying something outside your comfort zone,' says Chrissie Mavron, first violinist.

### Remove barriers

All four Mavron members speak to and lead games with the audience. Getting close to the audience means removing barriers, both psychological and physical. 'It is worth thinking about where you stand when you are speaking,' says Mavron. 'A music stand can separate you from the audience. I like to walk into the audience when demonstrating on the violin, to remove another barrier.'

### Follow through

After telling your audience what to expect, make sure you convey your musical points clearly and forcefully. 'If you set them up and don't deliver,' says Phillip Ying, 'the audience will be turned off the piece.'

A chief musical benefit students receive from outreach concerts is learning to show as well as tell. Striving to demonstrate musical ideas increases their involvement with both the music and the audience.

### Expect the unexpected

Unexpected things can and do happen. A young quartet visiting a Midwestern US town decided to play a movement of Bartók. Hoping its dissonance would not

alienate the audience, the players explained in basic terms the concept of tension and release in music. To their surprise, a woman came up afterwards to tell them she had known the composer in Hungary and had performed his work.

Szymanski recently played at a residential facility for 50 adults with Down's Syndrome. 'I found out they had been looking forward to the concert for a month,' he says. 'They had been drawing guitars in their art classes, and afterwards they brought up their pictures – 50 amazing drawings and paintings of guitars. It was so touching, so beautiful.'

### Talk about the emotions in the music

Overwhelmingly, people say they like chamber music because of its intimacy. They like feeling close to the players, watching them interact with each other, and feeling the music along with the performers. Older people, especially, want to hear about the lives of young people. How much do you practise? Why did you decide to play the cello instead of the bassoon?

To communicate with an audience, offer personal stories. A quartet might say, 'Listen for the place that sounds like three children fighting while an older sibling stands by calmly. The violins and viola play fast, tense music while the cello holds a long, low note. We like that, because we all come from families with four kids.' You could say this to a room full of seniors or a classroom of six-year-olds. The sentiment is universal.

As Chrissie Mavron says, 'Be yourself, enjoy the experience, and don't forget that there are no boundaries with music. The most important thing is to remember that it is not about nurturing the audience's opinion of you. It is about you nurturing the audience's love of the music.' ■