

MUSIC

A Symphony Breathes Life Into 400 Broken School Instruments

By JOSHUA BARONE DEC. 4, 2017

PHILADELPHIA — As the garagelike door rolled up at the 23rd Street Armory here on Sunday evening, 400 student, amateur and professional musicians paraded in with just a helping of the broken instruments that have spent years languishing in this city’s strapped public school system.

A trumpet was held together with blue painter’s tape. A violin, stripped of much of its body, had been reduced to a silhouette. More than one cello was carried in multiple pieces.

These were the unlikely ingredients of “symphony for a broken orchestra,” a new piece by the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer David Lang. It was written as part of a project of the same name to repair more than 1,000 damaged instruments that had been doomed to silence in storage because of severe budget cuts to Philadelphia’s public school music programs.

Robert Blackson, the director of Temple Contemporary at the Tyler School of Art, was the project’s mastermind and said that teachers around the city had been stockpiling the instruments in case the funding to fix them ever materialized. To Mr. Lang, who said in an interview he owes his career to public school music education, those instruments represent “over 1,000 missed opportunities.”

The teachers often don't have the skills to do the repairs themselves, Mr. Blackson said, and they have had to reckon with the near evaporation of the school district's funding for arts programs, excluding teachers' salaries, which dropped from \$1.3 million in 2007 to \$50,000 this year. The students hit hardest, he added, were almost entirely low-income minorities.

Colin Chen, a 24-year-old music teacher who played a clarinet in Mr. Lang's symphony, said that he tries to make the best of "very little resources" by paying for supplies out of his own pocket.

For students, the funding shortfall has meant that they often need to provide their own music books and supplies for basic upkeep, such as reeds and rosin. They also share the remaining instruments that haven't been damaged. Eleanor Martinez, a 16-year-old student at South Philadelphia High School, now owns her own clarinet but for a long time needed to share — which grossed her out, she said, given the amount of saliva involved with playing woodwinds.

If the school district wants to create "a Bon Jovi or Beethoven," Ms. Martinez added, "they have to give us the money to make it happen."

Enter Symphony for a Broken Orchestra, which has allowed people to "adopt" the instruments — around \$237,000 has been raised so far — to cover the immediate cost of repairs and establish a legacy fund for future servicing. Mr. Lang came up early in the process of finding a composer to commission, Mr. Blackson said, because "when David sees broken instruments, he sees potential."

"A broken French horn may just look like a brass coil," he added, "but David can make it musical."

Community music has also been an artistic fascination of Mr. Lang's in recent years, with pieces like "crowd out" in 2014 and "the public domain," which involved 1,000 amateur voices, at Lincoln Center in 2016. He has also reimagined his Pulitzer Prize-winning oratorio "the little match girl passion" to incorporate audience participation. (This version returns to the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Dec. 22.)

The musicians for Mr. Lang's symphony included students in grade school, as well as amateurs and professionals — even members of the storied Philadelphia Orchestra. The youngest performer was a 9-year-old cellist; the oldest, an 82-year-old oboist. It looked like the most diverse orchestra in America.

Mr. Lang's score explored the idea that the hundreds of damaged instruments were “only broken in the Western classical-music sense,” he said. In the opening, they were almost silent but gradually awoke with percussive sounds reminiscent of a rainstick. Performers tapped on violin bodies and clicked the valve keys of horns. At one point, a cellist made noise by turning a stringless peg.

For students, it was a drastic turn from easy arrangements of the classical repertoire. Evelyn Mtika — a 16-year-old from the Philadelphia High School for Creative & Performing Arts who played a violin with no A string or bridge, using a bow that had lost nearly all of its hair — said she welcomed the change.

“It teaches you a lesson and breaks you out of the box,” she said. “You can learn music in a nontraditional way and see that it doesn't need to just be in an orchestra.”

Joseph Conyers, the assistant principal bass of the Philadelphia Orchestra, played a quarter-size violin, which is normally fit for a small child. The fingerboard had collapsed, which would make the distance between it and the strings impossible for a beginner. But he laughed off the defect, saying, “I play the bass, so this no problem.”

As the 40-minute symphony progressed, the instruments roared to life with powerful force. Some musicians struggled, like a clarinetist who could get out only short spurts of sound and a French horn player who kept losing his mouthpiece. But together, the orchestra produced rich harmony.

From then on, the score was playful, even joyous. Solos recalled music education: A performer stepped out in front of the group and played a short passage that was then repeated back by the other instruments. Then each section began to bow out, until all that remained was the humble squeal of a broken clarinet.

On Monday, the instruments were scheduled for delivery to repair shops so they could be fixed and returned in time for the 2018-19 school year.

“This was a case where there was something art could do to really solve a problem,” Mr. Lang said after the performance. “It just shouldn’t have been a problem to begin with.”

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