

BRINGING STUDENTS THE WONDER OF MUSIQA

Group introduces arts to schools that may not be able to afford it otherwise

By CAROL RUST—Chronicle Correspondent

They came straight from the office, still buttoned down, or they trickled in wearing T-shirts and jeans. They brought sketch pads, babies in strollers, a sleeping bag. Lolling about on blankets or flopped down on their bellies with chins cupped in hands, these folks at first glance might be at a slumber party. Instead, they were lounging on the floor of the Contemporary Arts Museum and listening to the music of the nationally renowned Enso String Quartet, just back from a summer as Quartet-in-residence at Boston University Tanglewood Institute. As they played, the lifelike sculptures of Kiki Smith seemed to tiptoe around the gallery. As the quartet's penetrating chords skipped from *calmo* to *allegretto violento*, somehow the music slipped off the page and seemed to breathe life into the art. Some drifted around the room to soak it up; others chatted out of earshot and many remained rapt, their attention on the musicians playing furiously as the two moons of Smith's Yellow Moon seemed to glow on the canvas behind them.

This matching of contemporary disciplines and the anything-goes appreciation for it are part of what defines Musiqa, a group of five modern music composers from Rice's Shepherd School of Music and the University of Houston. And though this recent performance was for an adult audience, thousands of fourth-graders from Houston-area schools are getting their first exposure to the arts during field trips to witness Musiqa's works.

It was the group's founders' love of the music and its desire to deepen the public's appreciation of it brought the five together in 2002 to brainstorm about how to broaden their listening base. Creating free opportunities to hear it was the obvious answer. Instead of performing themselves, they became the vehicle that brings performances to the people, which involves long hours of backstage fundraising and logistics-solving.

New home, new mission

The low-key museum performances sprinkled throughout the year are an immediate outgrowth of that. Museum director Marti Mayo likens them to a bohemian New York loft in the 1960s. "People used to come in, and if they were interested in the music, they'd sit down and listen to it," she says. "If they weren't, they'd go into the kitchen." The alternative concert atmosphere was the trademark of Musiqa's first packed performances at its birthplace, the Rothko Chapel. But when Zilkha Hall at the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts opened in 2004 with its state-of-the-art acoustics and theatrical lighting, it became the impetus for a more ambitious mission. It was one thing to perform for people already inclined to go to concerts, but what about cultivating future listeners from an earlier age? And beyond that, how enriching would a first-time encounter with contemporary music be for a child who had never been exposed to the arts? That's how the five composers got into the field trip business, turning Zilkha Hall into an elegant classroom.

They targeted the most under-served schools in the Houston Independent School District whose budgets limited what could be spent on field trips, and arranged for their fourth-grade classes to attend a concert. Musiqa members orchestrated funding for everything, including the buses that would bring them to Zilkha Hall. "It's a full-time job," says Rice's Tony Brandt, who spearheaded the group's launch into the educational realm and does most of its talking. They wrote an interactive music program that incorporated samples of music from far-flung countries with such familiar tunes as *She'll Be Comin' 'Round the Mountain*, in addition to contemporary music that would be new to the students.

Musiqa's Rob Smith, a professor at the University of Houston, narrated the program, pointing out different musical techniques and explaining musical terms as musicians on stage demonstrate it. "Nothing was simplified for their age," says Brandt. "Kids that age can detect fakery quicker than anyone." The program starts simply and works up a staircase of difficulty, keeping the students' attention. "Our experience has been that if you set your expectations high, every kid will meet you," Brandt says. "We're operating on the assumption that all kids have music inside."

'Sense of discovery'

Musiqa members decided to hire a small group of professional musicians for the educational performances to make it easy for them to interact with the students. The musicians come mostly from the Houston Ballet, the Houston Grand Opera and the Houston Symphony. In the spring of 2004, HISD buses arrived in wave after wave with groups of students to fill the 500-seat capacity hall. Greeting them like VIPs as they got off the bus were Musiqa's members, Brandt, Pierre Jalbert, Karim Al-Zand and Shih Hui Chen, all from the Shepherd School of Music, and Smith. An immediate reverence descended on the fourth-graders entering Zilkha Hall with its banks of stadium lights splashing color against the backdrop. "There is a palpable sense of wonder, a real sense of discovery," Brandt says. That reaction has been a constant through the years. Musiqa is working to get the funding to include under-served schools in the Spring Branch Independent School District next year. So has the response when Brandt asks the students, "How many of you are here for the first time?" Every hand always goes up. Most students are already familiar with parts of the program from the material that Musiqa distributes to the classes in the weeks preceding the program, and their voices fill Zilkha Hall when they hear these songs.

In the weeks after the concert series, the thank-you notes pour in. "I can't wait to start music lessons," one says. "I want to play the flute when I grow up," says another. "It's exciting to see how open-minded the children are to expand their musical horizons," Brandt says. "These are our performers and audiences and creators of the future."



The Enso String Quartet, with Maureen Nelson, violin, from left, John Marcus, violin, Melissa Readon, viola, and Richard Belcher, cello, performs during a Musiqa program at the Contemporary Arts Museum.

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