

# Divine Providence

COMMUNITY MUSICWORKS MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN YOUNG LIVES

By Nichole Charbonneau



Photo by Sandor Bodo

Community MusicWorks, the first after-school program of its kind, begins its 11th season in September. It already has numerous accolades under its belt, including being named one of 50 premier after-school arts programs in the nation by the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities in 2005 and 2007. With new additions, growing lauds, and more state funding, this season may be the program's best one yet.

MusicWorks provides the West End, South Side, Elmwood, and Olneyville neighborhoods of Providence with youth instrument lessons, monthly workshops by guest performing artists, trips for students and their families to area concerts, regular Performance Parties and Youth Salons, and a leadership

development group for teens. Aside from the \$10 registration fee, activities, including the instruments, are free.

All of the program's offerings revolve around the Providence String Quartet, whose current members include Sara Stalnaker, cellist; Jessie Montgomery, violinist; Sebastian Ruth, violinist and violist; and Jessie Holstein, violinist and violist. (Perhaps you've seen Holstein around town: He's the Concertmaster of the New Bedford Symphony and a violin instructor at UMass Dartmouth.) The musicians teach and mentor, but they also function as a professional ensemble that performs in Boston, New York City, and often in the Providence area.

The program's concept began to take shape, says MusicWorks' Director of Development and Artistic Program

Coordinator Heath Marlow, in 1997, when Sebastian Ruth "walked into the West End Community Center and asked if they would be interested in having him provide free violin lessons." Later, Ruth attained startup funding from the Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown University, allowing the quartet to teach, perform, live, and immerse itself in the urban Providence neighborhood.

Increased popularity and a growing wait list of students prompted the piloting of a Fellowship Program in 2006, which introduced three new teachers from other parts of the country and 50 percent more students. After their completed terms, the fellows are encouraged to implement similar programs in their home cities. Two additional fellows will begin a two-year stint in September and enrollment

will increase yet again.

Marlow is adamant that children stay for as long as they want: "Our preference is for kids to enroll at seven and stay on through high school graduation (if not beyond as a practice mentor or maybe staff)." Perhaps the program's dedication to its students accounts for the 90 percent re-enrollment rate.

As the students grow older, topics of freedom, oppression, and cultural

String Quartet lies in its location. String quartets often reside, teach, and perform at colleges and universities. But Ruth was the first to use the university model and implement it in a poor urban area. The quartet is transforming the notion that classical music is only for the upper echelons. Instead, they highlight music as socially transformative.

Heath Marlow says: "This is the only string quartet that has chosen to

funding as the politicians begin to see the overall positive effect that we are having, serving at-risk youth populations and spurring general neighborhood development."

While studying at Brown University, Ruth followed the theories of Brazilian Paulo Freire and American philosopher Maxine Greene. Freire believed that education must become a process that leads to critical awareness of the world



Photo by Mary Beth Meehan

awareness are actively addressed. Phase II is a discussion group for teens that explores these complicated themes. Topics for Phase II include identifying community issues, choosing a beneficiary for the annual Youth Salon fundraiser, Plato's cave metaphor, and a discussion of *First in My Family*, a book about first-generation college students.

Proof of the program's significance lies in the success of its students. Many represent the first generation in their families to go to college. Their exposure to and appreciation of performing builds discipline, benefiting not only their music, but also their lives in general. The music becomes a conduit for their drive for social change and community togetherness.

The innovation of the Providence

create this type of long-term, storefront operation in the heart of an urban neighborhood. Through our Fellowship Program and a conference that we will host in March 2008, we really hope to open up new possibilities for young professional musicians coming out of conservatories who tend not to be aware of how fulfilling this type of work and lifestyle can be. We want to encourage the growing trends toward community building and making a difference in one's local community."

The organization's successful community building has caught the attention of several state political powers. The Providence String Quartet is considered one of Providence's cultural highlights. Marlow also notes, "At the state level, we've been receiving increased

around the individual, developing in students a capacity to change that world. Greene focused on aesthetic education, arguing that arts education can transform students to a new level of freedom. With these roots of thought, Ruth dug the garden that has become Community MusicWorks.

In celebration of its 11th season, Community MusicWorks will feature a local composer at each of its public programs. The organization's impressive website, [communitymusicworks.org](http://communitymusicworks.org), includes performance schedules, program history, a live interview with Sebastian Ruth, suggestions on getting involved, an invitation to join the mailing list, and a list of Friday afternoon Musical Workshops that are open to the public. ★