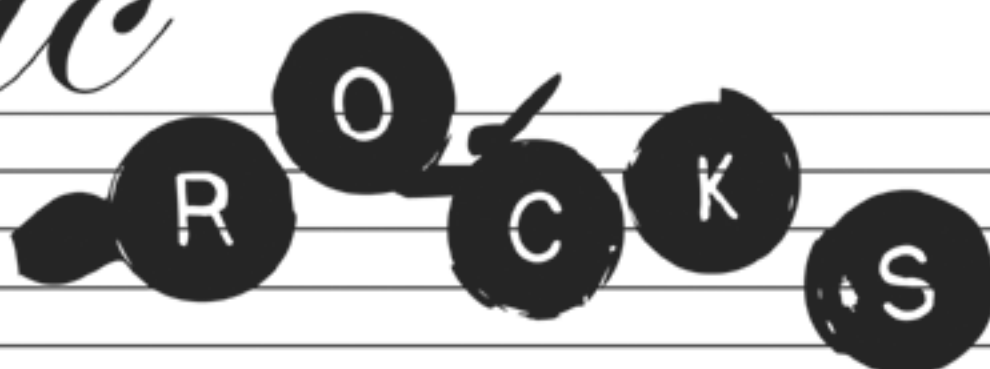


Classic



At 1392 Westminster St., a lovely old building that could have once contained something as mundane as a pharmacy or a linen shop, the delicate sounds of "The Art of the Fugue" by Johann Sebastian Bach are spilling out over the sidewalk and into the neighborhood air. A peek into the shop's front windows reveal the concentrated faces of four musicians making their way through what I will soon be told is, "one of the coolest pieces ever written."

By Jill Puleo • Photographs by Stacey Doyle

This is a typical afternoon scene at Community Music Works (CMW), one of the most innovative and successful music programs in the country. CMW was founded in 1997 by Sebastian Ruth, a Brown University grad, professional musician, and educator who was given a grant to get things off the ground from the Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown.

His idea was essentially this: what would happen if you took a string quartet and plopped them right in the middle of an urban center? The musicians wouldn't be safely relegated to the fringes of the community either. No, this would be no feigned attempt at musical philanthropy. CMW would boldly offer free instruction to children, playing for the community and its charities, and even taking kids and their parents to see the Philharmonic in Boston or Providence. Eight years later, the idea is alive and kicking in the West End and has become a veritable core of the community.

It works like this: Four brilliant musicians in residence — Jesse Holstein, Jessie Montgomery, Sara Stalnakier, and Sebastian Ruth — become the Providence String Quartet. The quartet functions as any other would, playing, practicing, and traveling on occasion. The difference here is that the members of the quartet do double duty as educators and mentors, teaching violin, viola, and cello to the approximately 65 children aged 7-18 in the Community Music Works program. You are just as likely to see them discussing with members of the quartet rehearsing a challenging Beethoven piece just as you are likely to see one of them on the phone ordering pizza for an afternoon practice.

On the afternoon that I stopped by to meet the quartet, Jesse Holstein was talking on the phone to someone's mom while lolling back in a chair, his sneakers pressing against the edge of the desk in front of him. "Is Josh going to be able to make it to practice today?" he asked, sounding a little like a kid looking to see if his buddy can come out to play. Satisfied with the answer coming from the other end of the line, he dropped his chair back on all fours and re-joined the rest of the group in the adjacent rehearsal space.

It was he who would attest to the "coolness" of the Bach piece, effectively demonstrating the prevailing attitude about classical music around here. To the quartet, and hopefully its students, classical music is not some taxidermy to be dragged out when you put on your fancy clothes when company comes over. Classical music is real, living, radical, and very much accessible to anyone who would give it a chance.

"Classical music is not old and dead. You can turn a symphony on and really let it crank up loud. You



Classical music has joined salsa, rap, and hip-hop as part of the soundtrack to West End life.

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