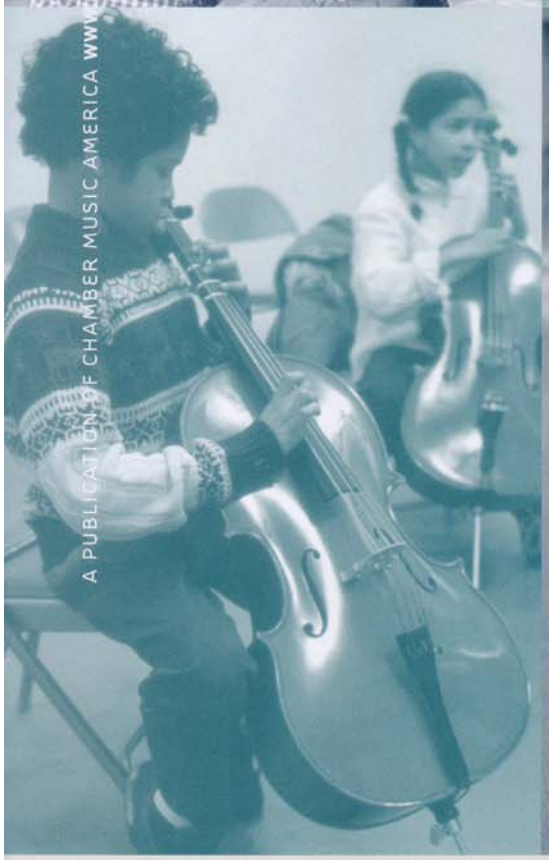
chamber music

JUNE 2004 $3.95

A PUBLICATION OF CHAMBER MUSIC AMERICA www.chamber-music.org VOL. 21, NO. 3

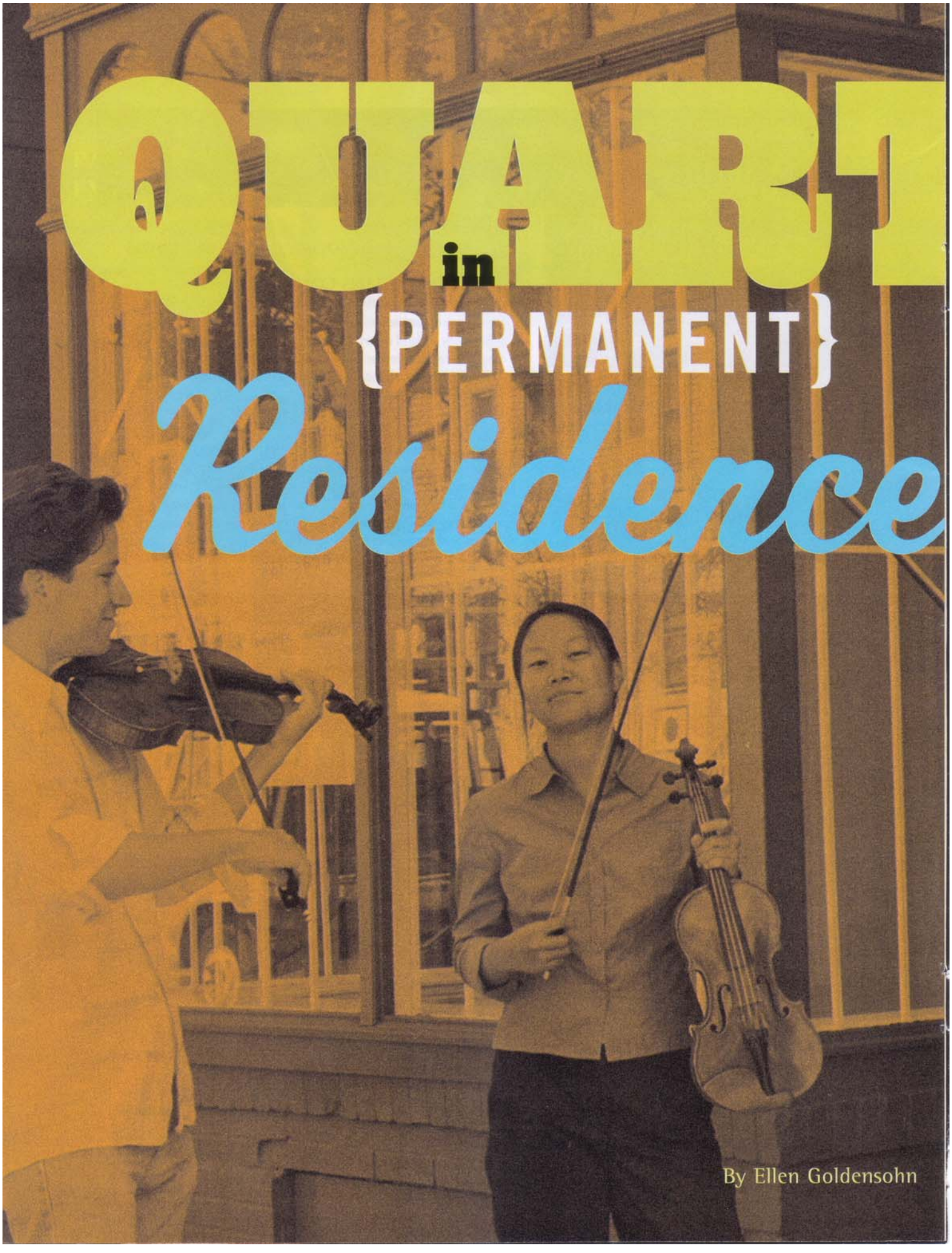
STOREFRONT STRINGS

HOW THE PROVIDENCE QUARTET BUILT AN INNER-CITY RESIDENCY



MESSIAEN IN STALAG VIIIA

A CONVERSATION WITH THE EMERSONS


QUARTET
in
{PERMANENT}
Residence
By Ellen Goldensohn

The Providence String Quartet in front of its storefront headquarters. Left to right: Sebastian Ruth, Minna Choi, Jesse Holstein, and Sara Stalnaker

One of the most unusual educational initiatives in the chamber music field is that of Community Music Works, a storefront operation in the heart of Providence, Rhode Island's, West End.

It is a sunny winter day, and a string quartet is rehearsing the Adagio movement of Beethoven's Op. 18, No. 6. The four musicians, two men and two women, start out with a half-hour of slow work on intonation—scales, thirds, E-flat chords. Then they start to play through the movement but soon interrupt themselves to discuss the tempo and to make sure the first and second violin are fitting together precisely on a particular upward-running scale.

A routine hour in the life of a string quartet. But the rehearsal hall—actually the bright interior of a one-room storefront in an inner-city neighborhood in Providence, Rhode Island—is anything but routine. A former spandex-clothing shop, it has been stripped down, painted white, and transformed into a hybrid business office/studio. The four chairs the quartet is using have been temporarily rolled away from computer work stations that, along with cellos and violins in cases, line the walls. As the musicians continue to work on the Adagio, the occasional visitor shows up. Every time the storefront door opens, cold air leaks in—and a little of Opus 18 leaks out. That porosity is a good thing. It means that neighborhood residents, drawn by the music, sometimes walk in to ask what's happening.

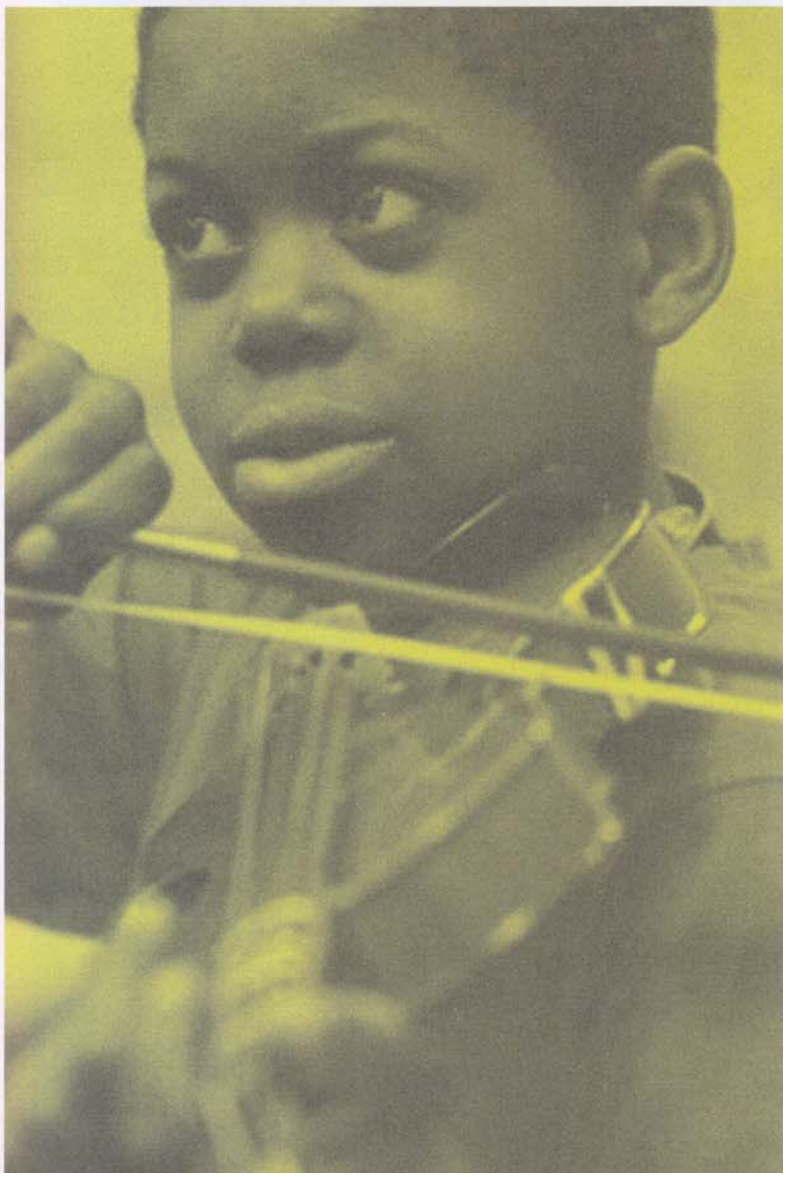
What's happening is the Providence String Quartet. Its members—Jesse Holstein and Minna Choi, both 29; Sebastian Ruth and Sara Stalnaker, both 28—are the resident musicians and core staff of Community MusicWorks (CMW), a tiny arts-ed organization that is well on the way to making a disproportionately large impact on its surrounding community. The city's West End neighborhood, where CMW is centered, is home to a diverse population—families with origins in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Liberia, Central America, and Laos, as well as a sprinkling of artists and students who've moved across the highway from downtown to take advantage of the large houses and lower rents. For a ten-dollar registration fee, CMW provides music lessons, instruments, workshops, performances, and group activities for neighborhood children ages 7 and up. The string quartet is the heart of the operation and two-thirds of its staff (a development consultant and administrative assistant make up the rest.)

Sebastian Ruth, violinist and violist (quartet roles are exchanged), started CMW in 1997, soon after graduating from Brown University. Submitting a proposal to create a residency for a professional string quartet that would live, teach, and perform in the West End, he won a one-year grant from the university's Howard Swearer Center for Public Service. Seven years later, the project continues to grow—largely because of Ruth's imagination, persistence, and ability to attract a core of committed people around him.

Raised in Ithaca, New York, Ruth was educated in an independent high school. The Alternative Community School required students to be self-directed and expected independent work. Another important influence at the time was his violin teacher, Rolfe Sokol, who, according to Ruth, had a keen passion for technique but didn't necessarily spend the whole lesson on fingerings and bowings. "He had a lot of ideas about what music can do for people," says Ruth. "To him, music was broader than the concert hall." Sokol, a man given to invoking the names of Albert Schweitzer and Mother Teresa at the drop of a hat, told his young student stories about Rostropovich and the difficulties of being an artist in the Soviet Union. (On the teacher's wall, Ruth remembers, was the famous photograph of a musician who refused to stop playing his cello on the streets of Sarajevo after his Opera Theater was destroyed by the constant shelling.) "Rolfe showed me that music could also be a form of protest. It was rare that I left his house before three hours had gone by."

When the time came to go to college, Ruth gravitated toward Brown because he'd heard that the school gives students a great deal of freedom to shape their own curriculum. Concentrating in music and education, he sought out Theodore Sizer, perhaps the nation's best-known education reformer, as his advisor. Ruth immediately got involved with the university's

"Rolfe showed me that music could also be a form of protest."



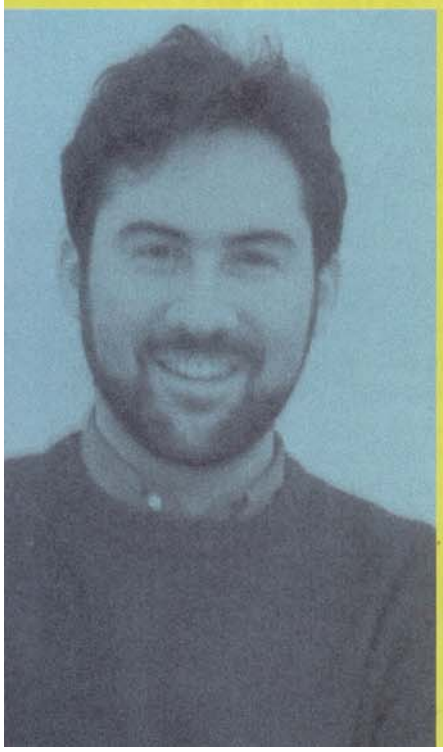
Darryl Clarke, now completing his fourth year with CMW

public service arm, the Swearer Center, and struggled to find a practical way to link his music with his social activism, alternately excited and disillusioned by this difficult process. During his junior year he heard the eminent education philosopher Maxine Greene speak at a conference. Greene (now emerita on the faculty at Columbia University's Teachers College) promulgated difficult and sometimes unpopular ideas (maintaining that the arts were essential to the very soul of education, and not a frill) that were seminal to Ruth's subsequent thinking. He read *Releasing the Imagination*, in which Greene discusses engagement with the arts as a gateway to intellectual freedom and critical thinking. A plan to teach stringed instruments to young kids in Providence was already taking shape in Ruth's mind. According to Sizer, Ruth met with some opposition, and even some scorn, from those who thought the violin both too "effete" and too difficult an instrument to teach to children from an inner- city environment. But Ruth quietly persisted; he had also been reading Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which the Brazilian educator's experience with teaching the very poor led to advocacy of guided self-discovery rather than top-down models of learning.

Eventually all this theory translated into practice on the streets of Providence. Today, all four members of the string quartet live, teach, and perform in the same West End neighborhood, and in so doing have developed a web of day-to-day relationships with local residents, students, families, and merchants. In addition to constant work on their own repertoire, they give violin, viola, and cello lessons to small groups (two to four students) three afternoons a week. The teaching program—held in two nearby community centers, because the CMW storefront is too small—currently reaches sixty-five children in all. (The good news is that the program is so effective that very few children drop out; the bad news is that eighty more kids are stalled on the waiting list.)

Every other month during the school year, CMW holds a concert and potluck dinner, called a Performance Party, in which both the quartet and their students take part. Beethoven, performed by the Providence, is likely to share the program with "Lightly Row," performed by a dozen very young cellists. Everyone contributes food, and whole families attend. "The people in this neighborhood tend to self-segregate," says Ruth. "The performance party is one of the few places where many ethnic groups mix." The parties have other important ripple effects: In watching brothers, sisters, and friends perform, the kids in the audience are inspired to join up (siblings get preference on the waiting list). According to jazz violinist and educator Diane Monroe, who has come to CMW from Philadelphia to give workshops in improvisation, "I saw that the smaller children were egged on by the older ones. The older kids were role models. And the Providence quartet is able to achieve a whole level of discipline. Even in all the chaos, the goal of mastery was apparent."

Two to three times a month CMW staff, students and families board buses to go hear the Boston Philharmonic or the Rhode Island Philharmonic in concert. The two orchestras (along with presenters at Rhode Island College, Rhode Island University, Rhode Island Chamber Concerts, and the Ocean State Chamber Orchestra) are involved with CMW's program and contribute free tickets and even free transportation. As all the members



Heath Marlow, who taught cello with the project, is now the development consultant

of the quartet will tell you, these field trips are more than musical events; they also expand students' awareness of the larger world beyond the neighborhood, and at times may provoke difficult questions. To cellist Sara Stalnaker, one youngster's observation—"Why are we the only black people in the audience?"—was at first poignant. "We were all upset; the last thing in the world we wanted was for our kids to feel alienated from the world of music. But then Sebastian said that you have to be able to critique your society. You have to notice oppression before you can do anything about it."

These kinds of issues are often addressed more explicitly in Phase Two, a program open to children who've been in CMW for three years. Phase Two gives the kids a structured opportunity to socialize with others in the program. Regular group discussion sessions and informal get-togethers are combined with weekend retreats (the latest was a rock-climbing trip run by an outfit that specializes in group challenges). Musical skills continue to be refined, and with increasing accomplishments come opportunities to participate in local youth orchestras and summer music camps.

Given the complexity of its tasks, CMW's small staff is always re-examining its priorities, balancing the need for musical discipline and its aspirations to create a sense of community with its own performance goals. A recent meeting found the group trying to figure out how they could open up some spaces for kids on the waiting list. According to CMW's development consultant Heath Marlow (himself a cellist), one quartet member wondered aloud if CMW should replace a child who skips every third lesson and is still working on the same piece after three months. Then someone else remarked that the kid skipping the lessons might be the one to whom the program, in its largest sense, was the most important. The idea of dropping that child was discarded. Inclusion remains the byword, and the waiting list remains long.

Although Sebastian Ruth has been the project's prime mover, everyone at CMW approaches his level of commitment. Violinist Minna Choi was a year ahead of Ruth when they met at Brown. They played together in a student ensemble coached and mentored by the Charleston String Quartet, which was then the university's official quartet in residence. After graduation, Choi went to the Longy School of Music in Cambridge, Massachusetts, intending to try a higher level of focus on her instrument. "In grad school, I enjoyed my lessons and my piano trio, yet I wasn't inspired. I was a philosophy major at Brown. There, music was part of a larger picture." Still looking for that larger picture, Choi soon joined Ruth at Community MusicWorks. With money scarce, she also gave some private lessons and freelanced in orchestras. The quartet itself hadn't jelled yet.

In the project's third year, Ruth and Choi got a small grant for an additional teacher. They hired Heath Marlow, whom they'd met through the Wild Ginger

"The last thing in the world we wanted is for the kids to be alienated from the world of music."

Stephanie Del Carmen first enrolled in 2001, left the program in the second year, and has now returned.

Philharmonic, a New York City pickup group composed mainly of Juilliard and Curtis students. Marlow had graduated from the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University. "I was thinking I'd become a freelancer," he recalls. "I love chamber music, but I don't like touring. I was looking for something similar to a university residency. Sebastian totally sold me on the idea of CMW. I was swept up by Sebastian's personality, which has been essential to our success." Marlow enjoyed teaching and playing, but along the way his role at CMW expanded and changed. He discovered an unexpected talent "for facilitating things for other musicians." Now the group's publicity and development consultant, he does everything from fundraising to event coordination and press kits. But Marlow also works on a larger scale. In early 2003, He set up CMW's Professional Advisory Council. The council members—which include the Borromeo and Turtle Island string quartets—mentor the quartet musically and help raise its profile in the New England arts community generally.

Sara Stalnaker's cello students playing pizzicato

The Providence String Quartet stabilized in 2001, when Sara Stalnaker and violinist Jesse Holstein joined CMW. A native Oregonian, Stalnaker left Rice halfway through her third year of graduate school. "I felt I wasn't connecting to the world outside my practice room and began to consider a career in social work or writing. My father was an orchestral musician; so I know how hard that life is. I never contemplated a life in chamber music because I'd heard few success stories and mainly tales of pain and personality clashes." Then Stalnaker, who claims that her rare impulsive life decisions have been some of her best ones, saw CMW's advertisement for a teaching position. "I drove cross-country from Portland and interviewed with Sebastian. The second he opened his mouth, I was completely captivated. And I also fell in love with Providence." No personality clashes materialized.

Street portrait

A product of Oberlin and the New England Conservatory, Jesse Holstein met Sebastian in 1999, when both played with the Boston Philharmonic. "We hit it off and had similar energy," says Holstein. When Sebastian mentioned that CMW had an opening for another violinist, Holstein jumped at the chance. "The job encapsulated everything I wanted to do: chamber music, teaching kids, to make a difference." Hearing Holstein play, one is struck by his expressiveness and virtuosity; watching him coax a seven-year-old boy to pay attention to the full value of half notes and quarter notes is a lesson in humor, gentleness, patience, and discipline. As Diane Monroe remarked about the whole quartet: "As for teaching very little kids, you've got to have the heart for it. They do. They each have something extra, how they relate to the kids."

Without a touring career for its quartet, how does an organization like CMW (with its high artistic goals and sky's-the-limit social aspirations) manage to survive and grow? As with any young arts group, the fundraising effort is relentless. Members of the Advisory Council help out with benefit concerts and workshops. Last year, the Borromeo performed Mendelssohn's Octet with the Providence and this

On Westminster Street in Providence's West End

spring Turtle Island came to the West End to perform and teach. Over the years, money has come from a number of private foundations (including one that paid for CMW's supply of student instruments), from Rhode Island Council for the Humanities, and from the National Endowment for the Arts. The first year's budget was $15,000, and it is now $250,000—large enough for two modestly paid full-timers: Ruth, the artistic-executive director, and Choi, program director. Development consultant Marlow is paid half-time; Stalnaker and Holstein are "three-quarters" employees.

Though rooted in their day jobs at CMW, Stalnaker and Holstein freelance. Stalnaker plays with the Rhode Island Philharmonic. Holstein is concert master of the New Bedford Symphony and in the first violin section of the Boston Philharmonic. ("A lot of driving, but it's worth it," says Holstein, who even if he did get a full-time salary from CMW, is not sure he could ever give up such experiences as playing Mahler's Second Symphony under Benjamin Zander.) Alert to the potential for burnout, Community MusicWorks also has some built-in mechanisms for self-renewal. July is vacation month for everyone, and each quartet member gets an additional week off to take a "practice retreat." Jesse Holstein spent his week to work with William Preucil of the Cleveland Orchestra, and last year Sebastian studied in Paris.

The CMW staff is hoping to expand its work space. In the near-term, that would mean being able to rent the vacant storefront next door. In the long run, the dream is to be able to buy one of those big Victorian houses that some newcomers are fixing up in the West End. "That," says Heath Marlow, "would give us room enough for offices, rehearsal space for the quartet, a library, and especially, a safe place for our kids to hang out."

All of the quartet members acknowledge that Community MusicWorks is still an experiment. But Sebastian Ruth wants to make the idea of a permanent community residency "a viable job for any musician." To that end, all CMW's employees have health and dental insurance—and are thinking ahead about developing policy on such matters as maternity leave. Heath Marlow hopes that down the road, other young quartets will come to work with the Providence and then go forth and spread the concept to other cities.

Meanwhile, the daily work goes on. The four musicians continue to hone Op. 18, No. 6 for their next benefit event—with Rhode Island Chamber Concerts in April. And then they jump into their cars and head for the Community Center. The kids are waiting. ■

Ellen Goldensohn is the editor of Chamber Music *magazine.*