

2011

July

Kitty Dukakis, July 28, 2011

Dancing on a Summer Evening

-Tonight's concerts had a dance theme. We started with a Leclair Violin Duo. Leclair was both a dancer and ballet master. After the second movement a woman piped up, "There is so much passion in the music you are playing and in the way you are playing it!" "I could hear a difficult journey," said one woman after a Klezmer dance tune and during the Canadian fiddling two step tune the women were tapping their feet and smiling. A talkative woman sitting directly in front of me quietly uttered, "I'm speechless, which is very unusual for me; that's a compliment to how beautiful this is," following the first movement of the Bach Double Violin Concerto. After the two tangos the woman commenting on the passion in the Leclair told me that she had thought this evening of classical music would be a drag but she was very happy to find out that she liked this classical music, that it was cool to hear something so expressive. She was not afraid to voice her opinion and had translated and pronounced the title of the Piazzolla tango for all of us in the room. I had told the women that Piazzolla greatly admired the complexity of Bach; following the final tango one woman asked me how to spell "Piazzolla"? She offered that she could hear the complexity in the Piazzolla we had played, and identified with the moodiness of that music. She plans to visit iTunes upon getting out of the Kitty D Center so she can download and listen to Piazzolla. Who knows where her listening will go from there?

Shattuck

- In the Shattuck Shelter I related the odd story that ballet master Leclair had a brother with exactly the same name. A gentleman seated in the front row, who attends all of our concerts exclaimed, "Just like me! My dad named all of his first born after himself. My brother and I have different moms." I had never considered this possibility for Leclair's family! This man sat rapt throughout the concert and just as he always does at the end of the concerts, thanked us profusely and energetically before he hobbled off to his shelter bunk. At various points during the performance an African American man, seated in the back, called out, flirted, heckled us in a way, with repeated requests to play James Brown. I responded, "Hey, we play classical music, you've got to have noticed that by now!" to which he smiled. We repeated this bantering jig for several iterations, both of us smiling and making an odd humorous connection that recognized we had different things in mind, but the African American homeless man and the white violin lady could still have fun here in the shelter. Joseph and Kermit were both in attendance though neither spoke to me during the evening. The evening's audience was uncharacteristically all men, twenty or so, except for the one elderly lady who lives in the shelter with her two adult sons. I was pleased that so many of the rough and tumble men who call the shelter home, some for years already, sat to listen to the joyful program of violin music about dancing. There was one gentleman I had not seen previously, missing one leg and in a wheel chair. He listened intently from the edge of the third row of chairs. During the Bach Double Concerto he wheeled in front of us, to pass through to the kitchen, then returned a few minutes later, perhaps with a cup of coffee. His wheel chair squeak squeaked as he moved; I thought our music must be a great contrast to that sound which accompanies him everywhere. As we packed, up a Haitian man introduced himself to me, in French. He was very pleased that I responded in French, thanked me for the music, and clearly wanted to launch into a long French chat. It was another evening of Shelter Music Boston musicians offering musical conversations, the energy of dance music, creativity, and passion in the shelter where so many people need not only a home, but simply to connect.

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June

Kitty Dukakis, June 20, 2011

Comments immediately after the Bach Oboe and Violin Concerto, arranged for Two Violins and Viola:

-I've never heard a violin before, this is the most amazing thing ever, spoken with a large grin and energized, sparkling eyes.

-I'll remember this concert for the rest of my life.

-I could feel so much passion and so many emotions in every single note you played. It was fantastic to be up close, watch you move and play this music. I played the violin when I was a kid. Hearing you play makes me think I might be able to get back to it. It was my passion, it made me feel so good. I can't believe I'm so inspired to try violin again. Thank you for coming here to play this music for us.

-I heard a love story between the violin voices; some arguing and comforting and maybe getting back together after the fight is over. Then lots of energy and maybe even dancing.

-The music reminds me of Tom and Jerry. (this comment has come up numerous times. It's always a happy comment. Memories of cartoons, childhood, music that felt good, a time before the troubles the women are addressing in the Kitty Dukakis Treatment Center.)

-After the Piazzolla "Libertango" the women jumped up to give us a standing ovation. Then many of them made an effort to personally thank each of us. Their attention and responsiveness was a big step in their recovery, as this particular group had been struggling with issues of respect and the group dynamic. The concert provided them with an opportunity to rise to a positive group dynamic, and to become, as a group and individuals, energized and happy in response to classical music.

Caspar Emergency Shelter

-The Emergency Shelter was very chaotic when we arrived. The bed lottery was taking place; this is done later in the day now that it's light out longer. We'd not witnessed this before.

Once we started playing I could see straight out the door of the shelter, to the street where a man who had been rejected was waiting for the bus, to go where?

-Those who listened to us responded with whooping and clapping between pieces. One man spent some time during each of the pieces miming that he was playing the violin. Another passed through the room dancing.

-As we packed up a couple we've noticed just about every time we've played came up to introduce themselves. "I'm Fran" she said, offering her hand for me to shake. "I'm Lucien," he said, "and your music really made me happy."

-Kermit, the man who had attended the late April Mozart Requiem performance by the Handel and Haydn Society presented me with a post card depicting a viola da gamba. "What is this thing? Is it like a cello, or violin, or what?" He listened to a detailed explanation of this ancient instrument, the predecessor of the violin, asked questions, told me he had never heard of such a thing and it was great to find out about a musical instrument.

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May

Kitty Dukakis, May 10, 2011

-From a woman in the Kitty Dukakis Center: "My mother LOVED Arthur Fiedler. I played the violin as a kid." This woman was quite downcast; I wanted to give her a violin lesson to cheer her up. An older woman, sitting alone at a table, had heard us a couple of times before. This meant she was a repeat visitor to the Kitty Dukakis Treatment Center. Later in the evening we learned she had previously been living in a tent, homeless, at the time her husband was murdered. All of their meager possessions were stolen from the tent. She expressed deep gratitude for the music we played. What does classical music mean to a woman who has been through these things? It doesn't really matter what it means, just that it means something to her. I could imagine that nothing would mean anything after what she has been through.

Shattuck

-A man with a very warm smile, and a job cleaning up in the Shattuck Shelter, told us that the music we bring provides him with meditation and medicine. That's quite an achievement in a place with a loud speaker blaring, a TV flashing, an industrial sized dryer rumbling and full of sneakers, large fans blowing, and many, many people moving around with or without agendas.

-The Shattuck Shelter common space started out fairly empty this evening, though two men were having a very agitated conversation at one side of the common space. This continued during the entire first piece, a Haydn sonata consisting of three movements. As we played, reluctant listeners, many looking very street tough, ragged, and weary, ambled in and sat at the edges of the space. By the end of the Haydn the agitated duo had quieted down, as did the entire room. When I played the Corelli Sonata by myself, the homeless listeners, numbering twenty or so now, were utterly silent. -During the tangos one man started to sing excitedly, seemingly thrilled to recognize an Argentine tango by Carlos Gardel. After the performance, this man made sure to tell us, in Spanish, that Gardel was an Argentine singer. The man did not speak about himself, or why he was so excited to recognize this music. I hope it gave him a sense of connection to something. That's hard to find in the shelter.

April

Kitty Dukakis, April 7, 2011

- We began the concert in the Kitty Dukakis Treatment Center with the Haydn Sonata in A major for violin and viola. Some of the women had told us, before we played, that they sometimes listen to classical music. The second movement of the Haydn is slow, introspective, and tuneful. While we played this movement, the energy of the room, which had been chaotic and even agitated during the first movement, coalesced into calm. The women became still and listened intently. I was very happy to bring them an opportunity to stop moving, to focus on something outside of themselves that offered peacefulness.

-When we asked for responses, following the final movement of the Haydn a petite, gray haired woman, who had clearly seen rough times, piped up, "Listening to classical music makes you forget all of your problems." That became the theme of the evening as others contributed that the music we played for them made them feel relaxed, inspired a feeling of

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meditation, and created within them a feeling of elegance, which for many was rare to nonexistent.

-Rebecca and I were asked how old we were when we started to play our instruments. The women were curious about the differences between the violin and the viola. Enthusiastic applause at the end of the concert was full of gratitude. While we put our instruments away, they filed past us offering compliments, thanks, and requests for our return.

Caspar Emergency Shelter

-In the Emergency Shelter we also encountered a number of questions about our instruments and the music. One gentleman, seated in the front row, directly in front of me, wanted to know what country our instruments came from. He told me he had been eagerly awaiting our to play another concert. There were questions about the mechanics and engineering of our bows. A woman asked about the differences between Beethoven and other composers we were playing. She said she understood what I meant about the complexity of Beethoven after I described his music as having more layers than the other classical era repertoire of the evening. Later she showed Rebecca a Yo Yo Ma recording she owns; she wanted to give it to Rebecca as thanks for bringing music to the shelter. Here was a woman without a home, carting around a fabulous recording of cello music and upon hearing live music in the shelter she wanted to share her own music. I'm amazed the woman has no home, but is clutching a Yo Yo Ma recording!

-After the performance, a lanky young man with large, warm, deep brown eyes wanted to tell me something. His voice was so quiet that I had to stand directly in front of him to hear him. He said, "I took my little brother to see Swan Lake. Before I went I thought ballet was just for girls, but the music so broad and beautiful, and the dancing was emotional. I didn't know that listening to classical music and watching dance could make my problems disappear for a while." There was pain in this young man's eyes.

-We also talked about what makes a violin sound good, the history of violin making, and his love of all kinds of music, the big feelings in music. He knew the name Stradivarius, which came up in our conversation about the sound of a great violin. I'm sure this young man's beautiful eyes will haunt me.

-As I packed up, a man who has heard us numerous times, approached me. "I understand the Mozart Requiem will be performed in a few weeks. That piece got me through a terrible time, ten years ago, when I lived in Northampton, MA." This man was referring to a concert I would be playing several weeks off. I offered him a ticket to the concert. He accepted but was worried about getting back to the shelter in time for curfew, about the price of the ticket, about when he could get the ticket, about how soon he would know if I could get him the ticket. I feared I was causing him distress with my offer, but after speaking with several shelter staff members, we have worked it out so that Kermit will attend a performance of the Mozart Requiem in Symphony Hall in Boston in early May.

It is a great honor to have a positive impact on the life of any one person for just one hour with classical music.

February

Kitty Dukakis, February 24, 2011

-The evening began with me asking the women in the Kitty Dukakis Treatment Center if anyone played the violin as a child, or now, as an adult. Three women raised their hands. I then asked if anyone played any other instrument or sang; there were two women who

played both piano and flute, a number of guitar players, and a singer. All were pleased to let us know they had played or do play. They told us happy childhood stories of playing music, which was a wonderful way for them to feel connected to us.

-After the Müller Duo a woman in the front row shook her head repeatedly, looked up at us and said, "That was amazing. I've never heard anything like that. Amazing, amazing!"

-A woman in the back of the room piped up, after the Milhaud, that she could hear how many different emotions the composer felt when writing the piece, especially the last movement, which is a fugue and full of layers of ideas and emotions.

-As we played a young woman sat writing at the table closest to us. She approached us after the performance, thanked us energetically, handed us a note on lined notebook paper. She told us that she grew up in Alabama, classical music was playing all the time in her house. "I've gotten overwhelmed before when I've had a whole lot to do and just quit it all, done drugs, been an addict. This year I'm under court order to get my GED, get a job, and complete some stuff so I can get my kids back. I'm Anna."

Here's what Anna wrote:

To the Violinist,

I just wanted to let you guys know how much it means to me for you guys to come in and play for us and especially myself. Music is a beautiful way to explain and explore yourself, and you two are wonderful at it. I never really looked at music in such a way before. Since you've come to the program and played I have told so many people and enjoyed music extremely more. I wanted to say thank you very much.

Thank you and sincerely, Anna M.

Caspar Emergency Shelter

-A gentleman named Fred, in the Emergency Shelter, was very interested in our preparations to play. He stood close to me, asked if we would play Bach, and wanted to look at our music. He stood close enough for me to know that he had recently imbibed a large amount of alcohol. (This shelter is one of the very few "wet" shelters in Massachusetts.) The gentleman proceeded to walk up to Rebecca while she was playing the Reger Solo Suite for Viola, peered over her shoulder as she approached the most difficult passage, and then wandered out of the room. He returned when I began the Telemann Fantasia for Solo Violin. As I completed the second line of music he strode in front of me, knocked over my music stand, and then tried to retrieve the fallen music. The shelter audience gasped as my music hit the floor, as this man tried to pick it up. Playing classical music in this shelter requires a quick sense of what to do next! I insisted on retrieving my music, forbade the wandering gentleman from doing so, and told the audience that the only thing for me to do was to begin again, so they would get to hear the beginning of this piece a second time, hope that's OK? Huge cheer from the audience and with a big smile, I started to play the Telemann Fantasia, again.

-The Telemann was the third piece on the program; shelter guests had, by this time, heard us playing and decided to attend the concert. The common area of the shelter was full of attentive listeners. They were very still as they listened. These few moments of stillness, while listening to classical music, are a complete departure from the chaos of their daily lives. The shelter guests are in desperate need of peace. Last night's concert lasted an hour. An encore was demanded; we happily played one. It is a great privilege for us, as classical musicians, to be able to provide an immediately therapeutic effect on people, especially those in desperate need.

2011

January

Kitty Dukakis, January 26, 2011

-The Kitty Dukakis Treatment Center was the fullest we had seen it tonight, our ninth visit. Tensions were running high, perhaps due to the additional stress of wintry weather, and finally erupted into an argument when one group of women asked another group, those talking during the concert, to be quiet. I asked all of the women to sit back and listen to the tension and resolution in the music we were about to play, the Lent from the Milhaud Sonatine for Violin and Viola. This music bursts with clashing harmonies that finally resolve into pleasing, calming, melodious harmonies. While we were playing, Rebecca and I could feel the energy of relief emerge as the women let the music buoy them away from the troubles of the room.

-A number of women asked if we could play Mozart, or Beethoven, personal favorites of theirs, and expressed strong opinions about which of the pieces, M. Haydn, Sibelius, Milhaud, and Villoldo, they liked better. The Milhaud, the most harmonically complex work, seemed to be the hit of the evening.

-The music moved one woman to tell me much of her life story as she thanked me for coming. The wide range of emotions expressed by what we had performed seemed to inspire her to reveal many of her enormous life challenges to a total stranger. She has four young children, to whom she sings and for whom she has written lullabies. She wants to get clean so she can take care of her family. She loves music and her mother has encouraged her to focus more on music in her life. I can only hope that the energy she found in our performances this evening will give her ideas about how music can help her to get well and stay away from drug addiction.

Caspar Emergency Shelter

-In the Emergency Shelter, the M. Haydn Sonata for Violin and Viola inspired a couple to stand up and to break into a spontaneous dance as they listened to this epitome of elegance music.

-Interestingly, a gentleman in the Emergency Shelter also felt compelled by the music to both thank me for the performance and tell me quite a bit of his story. He had suffered a minor spider bite on one leg four years ago. A resulting infection had taken hold to such an extent that at present he is unable to walk, without a walker, due to ulcers on both legs. Severe pain is an additional symptom. He had a job as a fund raiser for another local homeless shelter, has lost that job, lost his home, and is left struggling with a bizarre and debilitating physical condition that makes working very difficult. He called himself the "new economic homeless" as he has worked his whole adult life, is not a drug or alcohol user, and through a freak medical circumstance is now struggling to find work and is living in a homeless shelter. This gentleman loves Bach, especially the six Brandenburg Concertos. His face lit up when I played snippets of the first and third movements for him. He said he hopes he'll be gone from the shelter when we return in February, but he will find out what night we'll play as he will come to hear the music. I hope he will be a concert visitor, not an overnight guest, the next time we meet.

-Joseph marched up to me to say, "Mayor Menino should pay you for every time you have come here to play a concert for us, yes he should. Yes he should!" I told Joseph I thought that was a fantastic idea!