Cleveland Orchestra players share time and Talent with Miami schoolchildren

MIAMI – For many children in Miami, music isn’t just a hobby. It’s a lifeline.

And so when the Cleveland Orchestra visits, the effects are more profound than almost anyone outside South Florida can imagine.

Take, for instance, Wednesday’s “Musical Rainbow” concert at Lenora B. Smith Elementary School.

On a certain level, the event resembled every other presentation of its kind. Met with a rapt crowd of some 200 children eager to learn, sing and dance, trumpeter Michael Miller and principal keyboardist Joela Jones treated their young listeners to an animated, engaging show.
But it wasn’t until after the children filed out and the principal thanked the musicians personally that the real significance of the concert became clear. Her school takes pride in shedding labels, the principal said, and their appearance struck her as proof of how well they’re doing.

The event may have meant even more to Jones. A native of Miami, she attended Lenora B. Smith herself, and thus stood for the children there Wednesday as a living example of how far music can take a person.

The daughter of a public school band director and a child prodigy, Jones took advantage of every musical resource Greater Miami had to offer. It was there she received her earliest training and there she gave her first public performances.

“[Miami] gave me a wonderful experience,” Jones said of the city, recalling the tears she shed when she first returned to her old elementary school several years ago. “I’m very beholden. I love to work with Miami children because I was a Miami child.”

The impact of music on real lives was also quite evident at Touissant L’Ouverture, an elementary school in Miami’s Little Haiti neighborhood, where chickens literally cross the road.

There, during a visit Wednesday afternoon, five orchestra members (violinists Isabel Trautwein and Sae Shiragami, assistant principal violist Stanley Konopka, cellist Tanya Ell and bassist Mark Atherton) appeared as guest teachers with the Miami Music Project, a thorough after-school music program employing the El Sistema method of Venezuela.

Not so long ago, said program director Abiram Brizuela, violence was a real problem at Touissant. Now the greater problem is finding room, teachers and instruments to support the 400-plus children slated to be enrolled by the end of 2014. Originally, the program had 30 participants.

The Cleveland Orchestra’s role in this is invaluable, Brizuela said. Simply by showing up and sharing their expertise, the musicians reveal to the children a better path.

Whether or not the students go on to study music almost doesn’t matter, Brizuela said. What’s important are the self-esteem and larger world view the children gain from improving themselves, working together and performing.

“The whole point is to help them develop skills, period,” Brizuela said. “The biggest effects are on a behavior and how they look at themselves. It raises their expectations.”