Miami Music Project builds communities, one young musician at a time.

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Abiram Brizeula (right), a conductor for Miami Music Project rehearses with kids who performed in a Winter Concert Series for the Miami Music Project.

British-born conductor James Judd, the artistic director of Miami Music Project, says music makes the people come together.

No, he’s not whistling a line from Madonna’s 2000 hit, Music. Instead he’s talking about his organization, a nonprofit arts group that helps collect donated classical music instruments, gives them to children in some of Miami’s under-served communities, and teaches the kids how to play them.

The children are then provided the opportunity to showcase their skills before audiences at live performances. Judd, a guiding force behind the Florida Philharmonic Orchestra for 14 years, founded the Project in 2008 and some 25,000 public school students have
been exposed to classical music through its concert performances and via in-school mentoring and residencies at more than 10 schools in the county.

Most recently, the Project performed its Winter Concert Series show at the University of Miami’s Alumni Center, and some of its featured players were young musicians drawn from the community and the group’s two chapters in Little Haiti and Doral. A third Project chapter in Liberty City will open in January.

The children, some as young as 5, used musical instruments at the concert that they acquired for free through the program. Organizers, who also provide after-school musical education and training to about 300 Miami-Dade school kids who are enrolled with the Project at no cost to the families, say this pairing of instruments with at-risk kids is a way to introduce and build bonds between students and families through the discipline of music.

Judd, a star in classical music, has also conducted the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra and served as a principal guest conductor of the Orchestre National de Lille in France. He sees himself in the faces of his youngest students.

“\textit{I was damn lucky. I grew up in England in a very modest family in a town in the north of England. There, everyone, no matter your background, was given music lessons at school. They would take you out of your favorite geography or history class for music,} Judd, 64, said with a chuckle. “\textit{If you couldn’t afford an instrument they would lend you one. It was a small town of 25,000, but every school had an orchestra or choir. I started playing piano at four and a half with the church organist because that’s what you did before computers and TV and all of that.}”

The point isn’t that the exposure to music gave Judd a career path, although that was an outcome, but it helped form him as an individual. The Miami Music Project he founded in 2008 aims to do the same in South Florida.

“I realized what music gave me in terms of my own values as a person, as my own identity, and as an outlet for my own emotion. As you travel through the world, music education is more or less well promoted and a part of the fabric,” Judd said. “In Florida, and in the U.S., music is less part of the fabric. And the arts are considered dangerous by some political bodies because music teaches you not only facts but how to connect the parts of the brain. Music teaches you how to think, rather than just parrot facts.”

Methodology

Music education, provided to children ages 5-18, is through immersion. The kids, drawn largely from Toussaint Louverture Elementary for the Little Haiti chapter, John L. Smith Elementary in Doral and Charles R. Drew K-8 Center for the coming Liberty City chapter, go on stage almost immediately after joining, said executive director Anna Pietraszko. Children can apply to join the Project and don’t have to be enrolled in the aforementioned schools.
“Even if they know just one or two notes they are already an orchestra, using that component of teamwork and sharing from the earliest stages,” she said.

Instruction is held up to three times a week for about two hours apiece at the schools. The teachers are professionals and serious. “There’s no iPhone app to learn an instrument. You need to put the hours in, that’s why the program is intense,” Pietraszko said.

That rigorous training is just fine by Francesca Rene, 11, a fourth-grader at Toussaint Louverture who received a viola as part of the Project. “It encourages me.”

Francesca performed earlier this month at UM’s Winter concert. “I love music a lot. I just can’t stop getting into music. It gets on my brain and I can’t stop playing my viola. I can’t wait for a performance. It makes me feel happy.”

Schoolmates Lyanna Jean-Baptiste, 11, and Laszlo Castro, 9, echo Francesca’s sentiment.

“I was 7 when I started,” said Laszlo, who is in the third grade and plays cello. “My dad told me about the music program and I said I wanted to be in it. Music sounds fun to me because some songs have a steady and happy beat and that makes me happy.”

Lyanna, a cellist in the fifth grade, said the program works for her because “I’m meeting new people.”

The program is based on the El Sistema model founded in Venezuela by José Antonio Abreu 35 years ago to serve a population of children who were in need of music education. Abreu wanted to give access to elite classical training to anyone who was interested, regardless of ability, and especially to those of low socioeconomic status.

“In Venezuela, half a million children are playing,” Judd said of Abreau’s efforts. “Abreu used music as a social transformation for the kids, their families and the communities.”

The Miami Music Project has gathered about 200 instruments so far as a part of its “Pass It On!” program. The organization, which taps the talents of about 30 music instructors who teach in the county, welcomes the donations of more from the community — orchestral instruments in working order such as violins, woodwinds,
strings, brass, percussion but not pianos or guitars at this time, said Enide Dufresne, communications and development manager.

With the pending arrival of the Liberty City branch, “The goal is to create a network of orchestras, not just for those communities but throughout the county. Children will have a chance to come together and meld. Social barriers are broken down and they will learn from one another and speak the same language of music,” Dufresne said.

Program director Abiram Brizuela was a student in the El Sistema program when he was 5 and growing up in Venezuela. He says he feels a bond with the Miami kids. “I can relate to them a lot. I understand first-hand how big an opportunity this was because someone gave me this opportunity once.”

Building bridges

El Sistema guided Brizuela’s passage into a career as a composer and conductor but if its Miami counterpart doesn’t lead to the next Lang Lang, a Chinese virtuoso pianist, or Gustavo Dudamel, a Venezuelan conductor, violinist and music director of the Orquesta Sinfónica Simón Bolívar and the Los Angeles Philharmonic who came out of the El Sistema program, that’s OK, too.

“It goes beyond the music,” Brizuela, 27, said. “We do teach them how to be better musicians but that’s not the goal we’re pursuing, that’s one tool. El Sistema tells us the orchestra resembles the structure of a society. Each individual working together has a stronger power to support the whole organization. They have to be aware of the others’ skills and their role within the whole community.”

The idea is that like the diverse society from which these students are drawn, they have to learn to work together toward a common goal and learn how to interact and befriend others they might never have met in their own communities.

“The students are developing a self-awareness…and a particular voice,” Brizuela said. “The string orchestra plays with the symphony orchestra which is playing with the woodwinds and brass and percussion. It’s about how my individual role can be impactful positively. The outcome is if these kids can relate to each other and work as an ensemble and resemble the structure of a society they can understand the combination of each others’ skills.

“And that can provide a bigger result,” he said, a ripple effect. “A better city. A better country. And a better world at the end of the day.”