

Lions Gate Trio performs at York prison

Chamber ensemble breaks new ground with music

For more than 20 years, the Lions Gate Trio has performed chamber concerts for violin, cello and piano around the world. But in addition to their concertizing, the trio members share a keen interest in how music can reach people in nontraditional settings, and in what art can mean to the human spirit.

That interest in sharing the gift of music and its impact on different kinds of audiences led to a performance and musical workshop Oct. 3, 2012, at the York Correctional Institution — Connecticut's maximum-security prison for women in Niantic, Conn. The performance was the first classical music concert at the facility, and had as profound an impact on the performers as it did on the audience.

Upon passing security, the musicians found themselves in an educational environment, with the in-house teachers greeting them in front of the vivid displays of the library.

"I was surprised and moved to find myself in a real school," cellist Darrett Adkins said, "with all of the aspirations and ambitions, energy and challenges of a place of learning."

"An artist is one who brings light to darkness."

— *Russian painter/artist
Wassily Kandinsky*

But the players were unsettled, not knowing what to expect. "My nerves were tight after the piano was late arriving," pianist Florence Millet said, and the nervous feeling "was growing in my throat: insecurity about communicating in this situation, and all around us, tough life stories, some sadness, hanging in the air." Mixed with this, though, was "our certainty that music can humanize a space, can touch the innermost self."

Using the piano trio music of Re-



Violinist Katie Lansdale (left), pianist Florence Millet (back/hidden) and cellist Darrett Adkins (right) — otherwise known as the Lions Gate Trio — performed Oct. 3, 2012 at the York Correctional Institution in Niantic, Conn.

becca Clarke, the trio focused on two themes: teamwork/non-verbal communication, and emotional expression in music. They also gave a brief overview of Clarke's life, describing challenges she faced as a female composer and as one of the first female professional violinists in the 1920s.

During the performance, the inmates listened with rapt attention, which greatly aided the performers' process.

"Their close attention opened up and deepened the communication, in both our words and our music," violinist Katie Lansdale said.

Adkins said he and his fellow performers quickly moved beyond the idea that the audience was full of prisoners.

"Very quickly, I found myself teaching students — with all of the curiosity and wonder of students everywhere — not inmates," he said.

The performers drew parallels to the visual arts, something in which the inmates are actively involved, by illustrating how layers of a musical texture are built, instrument by instrument.

"We could even be playful," Millet said, describing how the musicians sat with their backs to one another to demonstrate cohesive ensemble playing without seeing one another.

Participating in discussion and interactive exercises, the prisoners noted

ways the body language between players helped communication, described the emotions elicited by a particular passage, and directed the players to try out different emotional affects. Following this in-depth exploration of Clarke's Piano Trio, the performers ended with a *bravura* finale: the fiery, pyrotechnical second movement from Ravel's Piano Trio. Afterward, a questionnaire/worksheet was distributed by two University of Hartford college students from the sociology and psychology departments. A communications major also was in attendance to write up the event for the campus newspaper. The questionnaire responses, though protected from quotation by privacy regulations, were overwhelmingly positive. They showed that the women were moved by the music, responded with imagination and perceptiveness to the discussions, and have a strong desire for more musical activities in the prison.

Because this event broke new ground at YCI, special guests had been invited, as well as higher administration. Jan Willis, Professor of Buddhism at Wesleyan University, attended, as did former YCI warden (1960-75) Janet York, after whom the institution was named. Attending York staff included Deputy Commissioner James Dzurenda, warden Kevin Gause, deputy wardens Alli-

son Black, Robert Martin and Pamela Senerth, director of curriculum Gabe Riccio, in-house school principal Mary Greaney, as well as several teachers, educational support staff, counselors, a media specialist and, in an appearance rarely seen at an arts event, correctional officers. York staff filmed the workshop in order to share it with inmates who were not there, and to preserve in the YCI archive for future viewing.

This workshop proved a special experience for the members of the Lions Gate Trio. "It was extraordinary to share our music, and to meet and talk with the women," Millet said. Immediately after the workshop, many of the women approached the players, engaging in animated discussions about music, and trying out the piano with Millet for more than 30 minutes.

After speaking with the teachers and students, Lansdale and Adkins were moved by the deep commitment of the teachers, as well as the open curiosity of the students. The son of a corrections deputy director for the state of Washington, Adkins came away feeling that "education is the most powerful way out of the system," he said.

After the performance, Millet enjoyed talking to the women. "It was surprisingly easy to chat and exchange thoughts with the women," she said. "They described the normal sounds of life in prison: the whistling waterboiler at night, the sounds of cell doors closing, occasional access to MP3 or TVs .

"Some women played tenderly on the piano, remembering melodies from their past. Suddenly, an officer shouted 'recall!' It was a brutal reminder of the reality of where we were."

"The event was important to York in many ways," YCI media specialist Joseph Lea said. "It was the first time classical music had been presented here. But a more traditional 'formal' concert presentation would not have had the same impact. The teaching artists made it so accessible."

Lea said the decision to focus on Clarke and share about her life made this a highly educational event; since the event, inmates have checked out

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— *Pianist Florence Millet*

both *Rebecca Clarke Readers* from the library.

The performance also marked the first time a piano was delivered to YCI. In fact, merely attending and listening to a concert were, in and of themselves, new experiences for many of the women, Lea said.

The women were asked to attend the concert and listen to the entire performance, and Lea said he was pleased that they did. The Lions Gate Trio's workshop marked the first time many of the women had heard an entire concert.

"The opportunity to see, hear and witness this type of performance felt like a once-in-a-lifetime event," Lea said. "It may turn out to be so for some of the women, but hopefully, for many of them, it will be the beginning of many new experiences."

Since the workshop, York administrators have expressed enthusiasm about seeking more musical experiences for the women. Lea reported that York officials now are considering getting a piano and incorporating more instrumental and music programs. "Hopefully, this was a beginning of a long-lasting initiative," he said.

The Lions Gate Trio's workshop was part of a project funded by a grant from University of Hartford's WELFund (Women's Educational and Leadership Fund). Under its auspices, the Trio will record a CD in January of trios by Clarke, Ives and Ravel for Centaur Records.

Lansdale, involved for more than two years with the project's design, said one reward of the process has been "the ways it made me think more deeply about what music can mean beyond the concert hall, or more generally, what art can mean to the human experience. Everywhere we look, examples crop up: people who made music to survive oppression — think of African-American spirituals or Gypsy czardas. East German or Russian orchestras that played illegal concerts for packed audiences. The Sarajevo cellist who played in the town square during bombings. Even cavepeople, who drew magnificent murals on the walls while waiting out icy seasons."

A copy of the Lions Gate Trio's new CD will be sent to the York library.

"The music took me out of prison. It gave me a couple hours of freedom."



An inmate (front) joins Lions Gate Trio pianist Florence Millet at the piano keyboard after the ensemble's Oct. 3 concert at the York Correctional Institution.

The women in the audience of the Lions Gate Trio's performance and music workshop at York Correctional Institution were asked to fill out a questionnaire about the experience. Some of their responses:

- "It was internally filling. I could feel the vibrations throughout my entire being."
- "It was very moving. It is something I will never forget — I felt like the musicians really touched my soul."
- It has a powerful impact inside ... It is amazing where music can take you — like living in a fairy land."
- "Amazing. Like magic — a rush. It made my day, being here."
- "The fast piece actually made my heart race, tensed my muscles. It made my palms sweat. I love it when I can physically react to something I can not describe."

If you could change today's performance:

- "I'd make it longer (several said this) ... Make it "never end."

What was a new idea for you today?

- "That I can actually appreciate this music!"
- "I had never seen music as art as well."
- I heard beautiful classical music for the first time. Classical music can make you feel great and different, and it is a very special and interesting type of music."
- "That it was pure to me. I could see and feel the emotion in the music."

On hearing music played live:

- Many said "I have never heard these instruments played live."
- "I have only seen a piano in movies, in *Two and a Half Men*."
 - "It's way better live. You can feel the emotion."
 - "The experience is much more personal live."
 - "You can hear the realness of the music."

Why does music take you somewhere else in your thoughts?

- "Because that is where you really want to be ... Music takes you somewhere

else because that is where you really want to be."

- "Because the music gets into your soul and transforms everything else."
- "Because music takes you to a place where a lot of things are shared."
- "Because music connects to the emotions and emotions lead us to memories and dreams."
- It is "when I am most alive, most inspired" when that happens.
- "Music is an escape."
- "It takes us to a place of meditation."
- "It clears your mind and puts you in a different mindset."
- Some said this was the first time this had happened to them.
- Requests for more frequent concerts.

EMOTIONS

Asked to describe what emotions they heard expressed, the responses differed wildly. A number heard mostly "soothing and relaxing," answered most questions with that. Others consistently "mostly worried, anxious". A few identified sadness, one imagining losing someone special. Another experienced being "amazed, inspired, moved."

MOVIE SCENES

Asked to imagine a movie scene for the music, the responses again varied from one extreme to another. It seems likely a lot of the answers reflect their own life experience:

- Many imagined being lost, being chased, panicking, danger, running in woods. "An escape story where one is lost and does not know which way to go but at the end is free."
- Two imagined serial killers (a far stretch from the music played!) — one chasing her, the other invading the family home.
- A few imagined a love scene or the search for true love.
- Several just saw scenes of sadness; one imagined losing someone special.
- One imagined man and woman arguing over staying or leaving.

- One comprehensive answer said: "My life story — determined, angry, sad, hurt, overwhelmed, excited, lonely, proud, hyper, relaxed."

TEAMWORK

- All of them were able to identify examples of teamwork from their lives, many citing current experiences at York (floor projects, cooking class, etc.)