



Music For A Cause: The Mission District's Community Music Center

By Matthew Strebe

The violinist's solo rises in the still auditorium air like the first rays of the morning sun, piercing the aching cold of the dawn with the warmth of the new day, the freshness of perpetual creation, the affirmation that life has begun and will begin again. As quickly as it emerged, it melts back into the softly progressing movement, its haunting brilliance subsumed again within the pleasant accompanying sounds of piano and cello. Welcome to the world of the Mission District's Community Music Center in [California](#).



Winchester House | © Gentgeen

[“Trio No. 1 in G major, *poco adagio*,”](#) by the 18th century German composer Joseph Haydn, was played with great force for musicians so young. Despite knowing each other for less than one week, few dissonant moments barged in on the music of these pubescent savants. Technically refined, their renditions lack only the [characteristic tones](#) of performers who, through long years of familiarity and emotive genius, are able to take an old composition and make it original once more. This quality is bound to emerge as their appreciation for music deepens.

The first performance in the [Community Music Center’s](#) Chamber Music Recital, its excellence set the tenor for the rest of the event. Young children and teenagers showed the depth of their skill on pieces as diverse as old German classics like Beethoven’s “Quartet No. 3, Series 10 No. 77,” or modern delights such as Xavier Quinones’s “Fuga a Tres Voces.” It’s a selection appropriately reflective of the student body at this school, where all races and musical traditions are represented, and the age ranges from two months to 94 years.

It’s an eclectic mix that attracts - and retains - many. “We’re a new community [to many musicians], but we’re also very safe. You’re not auditioned, you’re not judged. You’re just expected to come back the next week” says Chris Borg, the executive director of the Community Music Center. An unusual openness to all people is only one selling point in the Center’s inclusive strategy. Almost any interest or musical predilection may be nurtured at the center, and private lessons available on 30 instruments are taught by 130 different instructors. Specialists are on hand to provide instruction in the Western classical tradition, as well as jazz, rock, blues, Middle East, Chinese, and Latin musical styles. Group classes and orchestras are offered for children and adults, as are more esoteric means of instruction such as Body-Mind Centering and the Feldenkrais method. And with financial aid available, it’s affordable for anyone willing to learn.

“We make music accessible to anybody,” Borg continues. “Anybody who walks through the door can get a musical education. We gave out \$1.1 million in scholarships last year to enable anyone - no matter who they are or what their means are - to learn.” For those with little to no means, the Young Musicians Program, Older Adult Choir, Teen Jazz Orchestra, and the Childrens’ Chorus are all tuition free, and for the 17 percent of the center’s students who are below the federal poverty line, tuition is kept as low as possible. It’s an impressive feat for an organization with a yearly operating budget of \$3.85 million. With a clear sense of pride, Borg states: “And we’ve been doing it for 94 years.”

However, it’s not just about offering a quality musical education - it’s also about enriching the local community and the public as well. “We host 300 performances annually, both our own [such as the chamber music recital] but also community events. We make the space available at a very low price to enable everyone to be able to perform here.” It’s an effort both to encourage more local participation in the center’s efforts, but also to foster a spirit of giving among the students. “We try to show the value of giving back to the community to our kids, so when they’re older they will want to return and teach others, or perhaps teach here.”



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It's certainly a working strategy. Michael Jordin ([no relation](#)) started playing clarinet at the center in 1979, and spent 20 years performing there before he applied - and was accepted for - a job as instructor. "I love it here!" he exudes. "It's a blast teaching the kids, seeing how much they grow in a week's time. They're really sweet, really intelligent, and skilled." The level of affection he has for his students is especially evident in one anecdote. "The kids who start here very young, we trace their hands in the back of the [exercise] book and chart their growth as they progress through our program. Their hands go from too small to grasp the keys to being able to play very complex pieces."

Whether young or old, rich or poor, classically inclined or interested in folk, there's a musical experience fit for everyone at the Community Music Center. In Borg's words, "making music education available to everyone continues to unfold in ways that offer life-changing experiences to our students."

The Community Music Center hosts over 300 events per year. A full schedule may be found on their [website](#).

<http://theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/california/articles/music-for-a-cause-the-mission-districts-community-music-center/>