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Community Music Center a constant amid Mission District change

By [Marisa Lagos](#)

Photo: Brant Ward / The Chronicle

Lucinda Ayres (center), 8, and others also used their hands during choral rehearsal at the Music Center. The Community Music Center in San Francisco's Mission district offers musical opportunities to more than 2,400 people a year ranging in age from babies to students in their 90s.

Children's chorus members use a large rehearsal room at the rear of the Community Music Center in San Francisco's Mission District. offers musical opportunities to more than 2,400 people a year ranging in age from babies to students in their 90s.

Mark Marcella stumbled upon [Community Music Center](#) in San Francisco's Mission District the way many people do: As he walked down Capp Street, he heard chords drifting out of the old Victorian and wandered up its garden path and inside.

As the Mission District has continually changed around it, the 93-year-old school has remained constant, offering affordable instrumental, voice, composition and music theory lessons as well as ensemble and performance opportunities for students of all ages. The student body ranges from babies in the family music class to a 94-year-old violinist. Its main goal is to make music accessible — prices are on a sliding scale, based solely on income level, and about 68 percent of its 2,400 students receive aid.



And while many nonprofits struggle to keep a foothold in this booming, expensive city, Community Music Center plans to expand in the coming years into the stately [Victorian house](#) next door, which the school purchased in 2012. It also has a smaller satellite location in the Richmond District.

“I discovered Community Music Center the first week I moved to San Francisco ... and it really personified what I thought San Francisco is — that I could become whatever I wanted to be here, I just had to do it,” said Marcella, 28, who is studying both classical and jazz piano and said the community he’s found at the school has made the neighborhood his home. “It’s definitely this nexus of where people can find common ground, and music at any ability level.”

The music school traces its roots to the [Dolores Street Girls Club](#), a settlement house that offered help to recent immigrants. It started as a music department at the girls club in 1912, and in 1921 moved to Capp Street and became an independent organization.

From the beginning, access was a key point, and for a long time the school turned away kids of more affluent backgrounds. In 1938, it became a nonprofit, capping the monthly income of eligible students' families at \$200 and issuing a statement of purpose that read, "The purpose of this organization shall be to further the constructive study of music — to bring the opportunity of such study within the reach of those who crave it and could not otherwise afford it."

At the time, its board was made up of members of storied San Francisco families — all women — including the wives of [J.W. Hellman](#), [Mortimer Fleishhacker Sr.](#) and [Jesse Lilienthal](#), who are all listed by their husband's name in school records.

In 1946, said Sonia Caltvedt, the school's marketing director, the board agreed to begin accepting students who could afford to pay more for tuition, so long as the school could "still do justice to those who cannot pay as much." The decision was based in part, board minutes show, on the belief that "the school would be a definite social influence in their lives."

Over the decades, it expanded to include adults. Now, on any given day, musicians of all ages can be found holed up in the building's 10 practice rooms, which are available for private lessons or for \$5 a hour to practice in. Marcella, for example, spends nearly every one of his lunch breaks there playing.

The school has always worked to offer classes and programs that reflect the neighborhood's diversity — current options include Latin, jazz, blues and even Middle Eastern music. One of its most successful programs is the Mission District Young Musicians Program, which offers a free Latin music curriculum to 25 seventh- to 12th-graders from the Mission. And its annual Christmas show, running the first weekend of December, is a Mexican-themed, lighthearted take on Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem on Christmas Eve — with social commentary about immigration and gentrification.

Executive Director [Chris Borg](#) said that when he arrived at the center two years ago, school leaders were trying to figure out how to expand the school without losing its heart. The purchase of the building next door provided a solution.

"We have been here for so long, and even though there is so much change in the Mission District, it's so important for old organizations to remain," he said.

"The five-year plan I inherited had many open questions about the space issue, and I wanted to look at all the options, but as I got to know the neighborhood, the people, I could just not imagine putting all the students and faculty and staff on a bus to a fancy new building and still calling it Community Music Center. ... It would not have the CMC flavor that the neighborhood, the architecture of the building provides, and that is what we want to preserve as the neighborhood changes."

For more information, visit sfcmc.org.

<http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Community-Music-Center-a-constant-amid-Mission-5924817.php>