



In Service

From hospital wards to classrooms, prisons, and more, orchestra musicians are connecting with their communities beyond the concert hall. The five recipients of the 2017 Ford Musician Awards for Excellence in Community Service are at the forefront of this groundswell of activity.

By Chester Lane

Today's orchestra musicians rightfully occupy pride of place center stage in concert halls, theaters, and performing arts centers. Off the concert stage, they are also engaging diverse new communities with the art, inspiration, and solace of music in Alzheimer's care facilities, public-school classrooms, detention centers, and hospitals. For the second year running, the League of American Orchestras' Ford Musician Awards for Excellence in Com-

munity Service honor a select group of musicians who do this vital work, which embraces broad segments of the community. The most recent Ford Musicians received their awards in June 2017 at the League's National Conference in Detroit: Mark Dix, a violist in the Phoenix Symphony; Michael Gordon, principal flute in the Kansas City Symphony; Diane McElfish Helle, a violinist in the Grand Rapids Symphony; Eunsoon Lee-Corliss,

The League of American Orchestras' Ford Musician Awards for Excellence in Community Service were a focus of the League's Conference in June. The 2017 recipients of the Ford Musician Awards spoke at the "Activating and Nurturing Community Alliances" session, and the awards were presented at the Annual Meeting, with, from left: Todd Nissen, director of communications, Ford Motor Company Fund and Community Services; Yisel Cabrera, manager of community relations, Ford Motor Company Fund and Community Services; Diane McElfish Helle, violinist, Grand Rapids Symphony; Peter Zlotnick, principal timpani and education manager, Greensboro Symphony Orchestra; Eunsoon Lee-Corliss, principal viola, Knoxville Symphony Orchestra; Mark Dix, violist, Phoenix Symphony; Michael Gordon, principal flute, Kansas City Symphony; Aaron Bardollar, community development coordinator, Ford Motor Company Fund and Community Services; and Jesse Rosen, president and CEO, League of American Orchestras.

principal viola in the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra; and Peter Zlotnick, principal timpani and education manager at the Greensboro Symphony Orchestra. These five musicians were selected by a panel of peer professionals through a competitive nomination process. In addition to recognition, each musician received a grant of \$2,500, and an additional \$2,500 went to the home orchestra to support professional development for musicians in community service and engagement. The Ford Musician Awards for Excellence in Community Service are made possible by Ford Motor Company Fund.

While the Ford Awards single out individual musicians for exemplary achievement, the community service work they recognize is done under the auspices of their respective orchestras, linked to programs at those orchestras. Those programs take myriad forms. The Phoenix Symphony's Mind Over Music project aims to enhance learning and musical awareness by pairing orchestra members with classroom teachers in year-long explorations of specific subject areas. Community Connections brings ensembles from the Kansas City Symphony to community centers, retirement homes, and, in recent years, a men's correctional facility. The Music for Health initiative connects Grand Rapids Symphony musicians with music therapists in the city's Spectrum Health hospital system. In the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra's Health and Wellness program, specially trained musicians use music to

help hospital patients heal and to relieve stress for families and caregivers. At North Carolina's Greensboro Symphony Orchestra, multiple youth-oriented training, engagement, and performance activities take place under the umbrella of the Education Department.

Dix, Gordon, Helle, Lee-Corliss, and Zlotnick all work closely with their colleagues in these projects. And, as their stories reveal, collaboration with other institutions—schools, healthcare facilities, retirement homes, community centers, prisons—is essential to their success bringing their orchestras and their communities closer together.

Phoenix: Mark Dix

Schoolchildren in Phoenix received a memorable lesson in civics the day Mark Dix brought his viola and two string colleagues from the Phoenix Symphony to an elementary school classroom—not to play a concert, but to demonstrate the workings of government. "The violin was designated as the executive branch, the viola as the legislative branch, the cello as the judicial branch," he recalls. "We had little additions to our clothing: a necktie for the president, a cowboy hat for the legislature, a black cloak for the judiciary. A kid says, 'I want a bill. It needs to be very fast here, and very quiet there.' The 'bill' has to be drafted, go through channels of government, signed into law. We would play with our backs to each other to show what happens when we're not connecting. There were lots of ways we could manipulate the 'bill' based on involvement from the kids. Then the group played it and put it into action."

Education has been a major focus of Dix's work since he joined the Phoenix Symphony in 1995. His idea of bringing a string trio to school to illustrate the politics of tripartite governance was part of Mind Over Music, a curriculum-based program started



Phoenix Symphony violist Mark Dix (center) works in schools as part of the Phoenix Symphony's Mind Over Music project, which pairs orchestra members with classroom teachers to explore specific subject areas and enhance learning and musical awareness.

by the orchestra about six years ago to supplement its in-school concert activities. "An individual musician is paired with a specific classroom teacher," Dix explains. "They work together for a full school year and develop lessons where the musician comes in to address a particular topic through music. Bringing professionals into



Phoenix Symphony violist Mark Dix (center) is part of a research project studying how live music can benefit Alzheimer's patients, in conjunction with the School of Nursing at Arizona State University. It's one component of the Phoenix Symphony's B-Sharp Music Wellness program, which sends musicians into hospitals, homeless shelters, and Alzheimer's care facilities.

the classroom excites the kids, raises their level of interest in the topic.”

It can apparently raise academic achievement as well. According to Phoenix Symphony President and CEO Jim Ward, a three-year longitudinal study found that test scores were sixteen points higher at the school where Mind Over Music was piloted than at a control school where students did not have access to the program. By the 2016-17 season, Ward

“These programs are getting us out of our box as musicians,” says Phoenix Symphony violist Mark Dix. “We’re learning to really engage the people we’re working with, in as genuine a way as possible.”

says, Mind Over Music had been extended to ten schools, and this season it reaches twenty.

Measuring the positive impact of music on the community is also part of the Phoenix Symphony’s B-Sharp Music Wellness program, which sends musicians into hospitals, homeless shelters, and Alzheimer’s care facilities. In conjunction with the School of Nursing at Arizona State University, Dix and others are in the third year of a research project studying how live music can benefit Alzheimer’s patients. Dix states: “We’re asking, ‘What is the effect of musicians coming to a facility every Monday night to play for the same group of patients?’” Part of the answer, he says, comes from cortisol tests—the musicians, patients, and caregivers are tested before and after the performance to measure emotion-induced changes in saliva chemistry—and part of it comes from the forms that musicians fill out describing “where we’re at psychologically, how the experience has affected their day, what the mood of the room was.

“We’ve had a lot of training in how to adjust the music for these Alzheimer’s patients,” Dix continues. “Sessions are facilitated by a music therapist from ASU. For the first couple of visits you’ll see a lot of anxiety in the patients and the musicians. As the sessions evolve, there’s a higher

level of comfort. We see smiles and tears, see people singing who haven’t spoken in years. It’s also getting us out of our box as musicians. We’re not just coming in to play Mozart. As with the Mind Over Music program, we’re learning to really engage the people we’re working with, in as genuine a way as possible.”

Kansas City: Michael Gordon

Michael Gordon has served as principal flute in the Kansas City Symphony since 2007, and says that he’s “always done a lot of community outreach work.” Playing in prisons, however, was something he’d never thought much about prior to his association with Tom Smeed, a symphony donor and the proprietor of a local firm

musicians to retirement homes and community centers. A collaboration with Arts in Prison would help the orchestra extend that community mission to a different population. Under the orchestra’s auspices, Gordon invited colleagues to join him in presenting small-group concerts at the prison. The program launched in spring 2015. “The first time,” he says, “we went in with a string quartet, a clarinet, and me on the flute. It was Haydn and Mozart—not specifically tailored to the inmates, but in between pieces we spoke about the music and tried to relate it to experiences that would be common to them. There were about 100 attendees, who came voluntarily, and it was incredibly well received.”

Since that first 2015 concert, Gordon



Left: Michael Gordon, Kansas City Symphony’s principal flute, is a 2017 Ford Musician Award recipient. Gordon and his colleagues have performed for inmates at Lansing Correctional Facility in Lansing, Kansas. Above, left to right: Gordon; Christine Grossman, principal viola; art historian Stephanie Seber, who brought visual components to the program; Concertmaster Noah Geller; and Associate Principal Cello Susie Yang.

called Health Practice Management Inc. Smeed, Gordon says, was very passionate about the volunteer work he’d been doing at Lansing Correctional Facility, a men’s prison in northeast Kansas, and was a board member of Arts in Prison, a nonprofit dedicated to providing inmates with hands-on arts activities. Gordon recalls that Smeed “asked me if it would be possible for musicians from the orchestra to come to the prison.”

Bringing music to the incarcerated was an idea that fit well with the Kansas City Symphony’s Community Connections program, which had long been providing area residents with free chamber music concerts and sending small groups of

says, “We’ve gotten a little more creative with our programming. An idea about composers who had been in jail turned into a concert that was all music by Beethoven,” who had been jailed for disorderly conduct. “We used a string quartet and a woodwind quintet, with Aram Demirjian, who was then our assistant conductor, curating and narrating. It included the aria from *Fidelio* where Florestan is in jail and sings about his love. The culmination of the concert was ‘Ode to Joy’ from the Ninth Symphony, with the men singing in English.” A recent performance at the prison featured flute quartets by Mozart and Debussy paired with Classical and Impressionist paintings selected

Since the Kansas City Symphony prison concert program launched in 2015, “at least 40 musicians have gotten involved, and everyone has had a positive experience,” says Kansas City Symphony Principal Flute Michael Gordon.

by art historian Stephanie Seber, who is married to the orchestra’s current assistant conductor, Jason Seber. “She had a slide show running as we played, and in between pieces I talked about how the music relates to the art.”

Gordon says that since the prison concert program launched, “at least 40 musicians have gotten involved, and everyone has had a positive experience. I got the ball rolling on this, but it has momentum now. It’s no different from the other community work we do—just with a different community. Hopefully we’re helping them deal with their feelings, giving them some sort of creative inspiration or outlet. It’s incredibly meaningful for them to feel remembered by the outside world, to talk to us and have a normal civilized conversation. Eventually most of these people will get out of prison, and I think we can contribute to making their post-prison life successful.”

Grand Rapids: Diane McElfish Helle

Violinist Diane McElfish Helle discovered the positive effect that live music can have in a hospital environment about twelve years ago, when she played for her father in a neuro-intensive care facility in Pittsburgh. She had come to his room to play privately, but the sound of her violin reached other patients, their family members, and hospital staff. “People were asking me if I could play for their loved ones, too,” she recalls. “I could see that I was bringing something valuable. The music was pushing away the patients’ fear and anxiety; it gave them a touch of beauty and, I think, a sense of peace. Nurses would also hear the music and stop what they were doing to listen. Their jobs are stressful, and this was good for them as well.”

Today Helle administers and partici-

pates in Music for Health—a partnership between the Grand Rapids Symphony, where she has been a member of the violin section since 1980, and Spectrum Health, which runs several hospitals in the Grand Rapids area. Helle says that her experience of bringing music to hospital patients was the catalyst for the program: “In 2012, I got the green light from the symphony to meet with a music therapist and program director at Spectrum to explore how the symphony might contribute to their work with patients who’d had traumatic brain injury. Out of this grew our first Music for Health initiative, with three pairs of musicians playing for group music therapy sessions every month.” By the end of the program’s second year, ten musicians were doing 50 sessions a year, and had begun working with cancer patients as well.

tra—“really understood what we were doing,” says Helle. “The music therapists would often end a session with relaxation techniques; they would say, ‘I want music that goes for three minutes, or five minutes, or eight minutes.’ So I talked with Jeremy and said, ‘Let’s set up a set of improvisations and write them in an aleatoric style so we have different lines that can work together.’ The musicians got used to doing this kind of improvisation in live sessions.”

One of the Spectrum facilities, the



Terry Johnston



Terry Johnston

In addition to performing with the Grand Rapids Symphony, violinist Diane McElfish Helle brings music to patients and families at several Grand Rapids hospitals (above) and works with children (left).

“It’s good to take musical duos into a hospital,” she says, “because they’re flexible, easy to schedule, and don’t take up much space. But we wanted more repertoire, so we started commissioning pieces that could be done by any two instruments, bass and treble.” A Getty Foundation grant in 2015 helped create a New Music Collection of commissioned works—original ones as well as arrangements—for use by ensembles from the orchestra in Spectrum’s music therapy sessions.

One of the commissioned composers, Jeremy Crosmer—he was then the orchestra’s assistant principal cellist, and is now with the Detroit Symphony Orches-

Helen DeVos Children’s Hospital, approached Helle with a proposal to fund a recording of music that would, as she puts it, “positively affect the child and family life for people in the hospital.” The result was *Meditations*, a recording of extended duo and quartet improvisations for relaxation. It debuted last March in five Spectrum hospitals, where it can be heard 24 hours a day. “It’s for staff as well as patients and families,” says Helle. “A leukemia patient learned about it from a music therapist who was helping her with guided meditation. ‘I’ve had it on all day,’ she said, ‘and I felt like I wasn’t even in the hospital.’”

Grand Rapids Symphony violinist Diane McElfish Helle discovered the positive effect of live music in a hospital environment twelve years ago. Today, she administers and participates in Music for Health, a partnership between the orchestra and Spectrum Health, which runs several hospitals.

Knoxville: Eunsoon Lee-Corliss

At the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra, a commitment to helping hospital patients through a Music and Wellness program led to an investment in specialized train-

When she brings her viola to the neonatal intensive care unit of the University of Tennessee Medical Center, Lee-Corliss partners with Alana Dellatan Seaton, a professional music therapist. “We both check the mood of the babies and the air of the room,” says Lee-Corliss. “We watch the monitors carefully, and Alana uses equipment to measure my sound; we try not to go over 55 decibels. I put myself three or four feet in front of the babies. When they’re wide awake they try to locate and follow the sound. On the monitor I can see their heart rate coming down and oxygen levels going up. Some of the babies smile, some are just calm. They are all lying down, except when nurses or parents are feeding or hugging them. When mothers are sitting in a rocking chair and holding a baby, I try to synchronize my rhythm with the mo-

acute, cognitively impaired, high anxiety and pain, and actively dying. As violist in one of the KSO string quartets—two other ensembles play for young children in libraries and for students in the Knox County schools—Lee-Corliss performs several times a month in hospital settings for patients of all ages, tailoring the music to their needs.

A typical visit to UT Medical Center with the quartet, she says, involves “two services of 45 minutes each—one in the lobby, then one in the cancer ward. We decide what music is appropriate, and play from iPads that have more than 300 pieces. If we get a request for something, we can find it right away.” Lee-Corliss describes the emotional effect of playing for patients in their rooms or the hospital’s chemotherapy center: “Sometimes I see that they’ve been waiting for me to

Eunsoon Lee-Corliss, principal viola in the Knoxville Symphony, describes the effect of playing for patients in their rooms or the hospital’s chemotherapy center: “A tear will come to their eye, and they’ll say, ‘Thank you. I needed that.’”



Above: Knoxville Symphony Principal Viola Eunsoon Lee-Corliss regularly brings music to babies in the neonatal intensive care unit of the University of Tennessee Medical Center, where she partners with Alana Dellatan Seaton, a professional music therapist. Right: As violist in one of the KSO string quartets, she performs several times a month in various hospital settings.



ing for its musicians. Principal Violist Eunsoon Lee-Corliss is one of four KSO musicians who have earned credentials as a Certified Music Practitioner after completing a rigorous course administered by Music for Healing and Transition, a nonprofit that says it uses music to “bring in-the-moment comfort to the patient’s whole being—emotional, spiritual, mental, and physiological.”

tion of the chair. Eventually the babies fall asleep.”

Serenading infants with her viola is just one of the ways Lee-Corliss participates in the Knoxville Symphony’s hospital-centered activities. The Music for Healing and Transition course, which she completed in the summer of 2015, taught her how to do patient assessments and identify five categories of illness and distress: acute, non-

come, or have scheduled the appointment for a time when they could hear the music. We’re bringing pure sound, and it provides relaxation. A tear will come to their eye, and they’ll say, “Thank you. I needed that.” It’s a good feeling.

“With music,” she says, “I think I can be helpful to people in the community who are too sick to communicate, or who are waiting to open up emotions that have been closed for a while. Music is the vehicle to bring out those emotions, and I put all my passion into it.”

Greensboro: Peter Zlotnick

As principal timpanist and education manager of the Greensboro Symphony Orchestra, Peter Zlotnick has an outsized impact on young people in North Carolina’s Guilford County. He’s a highly visible onstage presence for the more than 25,000 schoolchildren who attend concerts by



David Donnelly



David Donnelly

At the Guilford Child Development Center, Greensboro Symphony Orchestra Principal Timpani and Education Manager Peter Zlotnick (above) works with four-year-olds in a Head Start program, teaching percussion skills and leading hands-on activities.

the full orchestra each year, and they hear music that he's had a hand in selecting. Some kids see him in action with a percussion trio, one of several ensembles that the Greensboro Symphony regularly sends to the county's elementary schools, as well as retirement homes, hospitals, and a juvenile detention center. Other children may know Zlotnick from the Lillian Rauch Beginning Strings Program, a partnership between the orchestra and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro that serves more than 150 children at two elementary schools. Students in the GSO's three youth ensembles audition, rehearse, perform, and pay their tuition on a schedule that he created in his role as education manager. At the Guilford Child Development Center, he works with four-year-olds in a Head Start program, imparting percussion skills and engaging the kids with hands-on activities.

And Zlotnick plays in and produces OrKIDStra, an annual concert by the

Peter Zlotnick plays in and produces OrKIDStra, a concert performed annually by the Greensboro Symphony Percussion Ensemble that engages young children with a singalong, oversized illustrations, and a narrator.

Greensboro Symphony Percussion Ensemble that engages young children with a singalong, oversized illustrations, and a storytelling narrator. Each OrKIDStra production is based on a children's book—several years ago it was the Beatrix Potter classic *Peter Rabbit*; last year it was *Caps for Sale* by Esphyr Slobodkina—because a key goal of the program is to encourage literacy. “The kids who will be coming to the concert—five or six hundred of them—all receive the book,” Zlotnick says. “We get funding to buy copies of it for them—a lot of Head Start kids don't have many books at home. Every year we use a different book; it becomes the theme of the concert, and we choose music that goes with the story. This year we're expanding the program, sending musicians to Head Start centers in January, February, and March to help prepare kids for the spring concert.”

When we spoke in early November, Zlotnick was looking forward to bringing yet another dimension to the Greensboro Symphony's community service program: a composition project for third- and fourth-graders. “In the next couple of months,” he says, “the kids will create short melodies, 15 to 30 seconds each, and record them with whatever instrument they're using at school—voice, violin, recorder. A composition professor at UNC Greensboro will have the melodies orchestrated, and the symphony will play a select number of them at a concert in the spring. This is something we haven't done before, and it will be exciting.” **S**

CHESTER LANE served on the editorial staff of *Symphony* from 1979 to 2017. His article “Music Close to Home: The Vital Role of Community Orchestras in America” in the November/December 2001 issue won an ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award.

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