



Oregon Symphony musicians, including percussionist Sergio Carreno (left), have performed three annual holiday concerts at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Portland, Oregon (below) for inmates who are preparing to return to society.

Josh Kulla

# Two-Way

# Conversation

by Steven Brown



Coffee Creek Correctional Facility

The Coffee Creek Correctional Facility choir joins the Oregon Symphony for a holiday performance.

Matthew Wright

Chattanooga Symphony Orchestra  
Concertmaster Holly Mulcahy performs  
at the Walker State Faith and Character  
Based Prison in Rock Spring, Georgia.



**More and more orchestras are using music to improve the lives of the incarcerated, young mothers, the homeless, new immigrants, and people with developmental disabilities. The interactions bring new meaning to musicians' own lives as well.**

**S**ergio Carreno had an idea what he would see, but he still got a jolt from actually facing it: Barbed wire. Guard towers. Concrete. Steel bars. Just as most of us might have pictured it. “You walk in, and it’s a prison,” the Oregon Symphony percussionist recalls. Carreno and some Oregon Symphony colleagues had just passed through the security checkpoints at the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, a women’s prison south of Portland. They had come to play a holiday concert—their first-ever performance there. “It was a big question mark,” Carreno says. “How was this going to go? What was it going to be like?” As the musicians played holiday favorites and led a sing-along, Carreno got his answer.

“Tears were flowing,” Carreno says. “Smiles and good cheer and warm feelings. It was a reflection of how important art can be. I’ve rarely had such special experiences playing music. It truly defines for me why I’ve done what I’ve done my whole life—it’s to be able to give back. All of us musicians really felt it was a very special night. It will be with me forever.” Playing symphonic masterworks for concert-hall audiences is gratifying, Carreno says, but performing for inmates goes beyond that. And orchestras, too, are finding that their impact can reach beyond the concert hall. They can serve their communities’ needs—even needs that, on the surface, may not seem directly connected to music.

Oregon Symphony musicians have now

performed three annual holiday concerts for Coffee Creek inmates who are preparing to return to society. A similar effort is underway with the Chattanooga Symphony and inmates of a nearby prison. Members of the Seattle Symphony and Maine’s Portland Symphony are helping the homeless use music to find hope. Thanks to the Owensboro Symphony in Kentucky, music is breaking through the barriers that can cut off disabled people. And via Lincoln’s Symphony in Nebraska, music is helping connect new immigrants to the community.

These orchestras are far from alone: similar initiatives are underway everywhere from Chicago to Los Angeles to Kansas City. Musicians from the Chicago

Symphony Orchestra have performed Beethoven's Fifth Symphony as a benefit concert for the Greater Chicago Food Depository; Kansas City Symphony musicians are regularly bringing their music to correctional facilities; and Los Angeles Philharmonic violinist Vijay Gupta has taken an active role in bringing music to L.A.'s homeless community through his Street Symphony initiative. In 2005, violinist Kelly Hall-Tompkins founded Music Kitchen—Food for the Soul, which has, to date, brought chamber music to people in New York City homeless shelters, and for the past eight years the League of American Orchestras has operated "Orchestras Feeding America," an annual food drive in which over 450 orchestras have collected and donated nearly 500,000 pounds of food. Colorado's Fort Collins Symphony has an ongoing program with medical professionals to study measurable outcomes of music on people with dementia.

Orchestras are adopting "a genuinely inclusive philosophy that what we do is inspirational," Seattle Symphony President and CEO Simon Woods says. "Everybody has a right to engage with that. We've all begun to think very hard about, 'How do we make what we do available to people who are on the fringes of society—the forgotten corners?' In the Seattle Symphony's case, the homeless. Or people living in low-income housing. People living in transitional housing. Prison populations. There

has been a very big rethink of what our role is. It's really an existential change of philosophy."

### Seattle: Dignity Through Music

The Seattle Symphony launched its Simple Gifts program, devoted to the homeless, last summer. The initiative builds on partnerships the orchestra already forged with social-services groups. Simple Gifts expands the orchestra's existing Community Connections program, with "gifts"

**"Homelessness is often transitional," says Seattle Symphony President and CEO Simon Woods. "While people are experiencing these difficult moments in their lives, it's very important that they retain their dignity, their inspiration. And that's where we come in."**

referring to the "simple dignity, joy, and hope that music and the creative process can bring to others." A recent residency by the sound sculptor Trimpin, funded by the League of American Orchestras' Music Alive program, incorporated creativity and music composition, with the Seattle innovator helping the homeless

and other clients of Seattle's Path With Art nonprofit create instruments from found objects.

The orchestra intensified its focus on the homeless after Seattle Mayor Ed Murray and King County Executive Dow Constantine declared a state of emergency in the face of the crisis in November 2015. On a given night, according to All Home King County, a community partnership, about 10,000 people in the county have no roofs over their heads. "After the state of emergency was declared, we thought, 'What is it that we might do to help?' We didn't want to wade into this in a way that would seem tokenistic," Woods says. "We were very careful to have conversations with our partners in the homelessness area. We asked, 'Do you think the work we're doing with you is meaningful? Does it have an impact?' What we heard back, loud and clear, is that homelessness is often something that is transitional for people. While people are experiencing these difficult moments in their lives, it's very important that they retain their dignity, their inspiration. And that's where we come in."

The first of Seattle's Simple Gifts projects came to fruition in February 2017, when the orchestra's subscription concerts combined Charles Ives's "Holidays" Symphony with artworks that clients of three nonprofits created in response to Ives's musical evocation of America. During the interactive workshops that yielded those illustrations, the homeless participants shared thoughts that Seattle Civic Poet Claudia Castro Luna transformed into texts that were woven into the performances. Luna read the resulting poetry before each movement, and between movements the illustrations were shown on screens.

"We try very hard not to divorce our community work from our artistic thinking," Woods says. "I give great kudos to Ludovic Morlot, our music director. Early on after we launched this homelessness program, he said, 'I love this. This is important work. How can we connect this to what we do artistically?' That's a relatively new area for organizations. We're going to have to generally get better at trying to weave this work into our artistic missions.'"

Also under the umbrella of the Seattle Symphony's Simple Gifts initiative is a lo-

Inmates at the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility take in an Oregon Symphony performance.





Members of Seattle's homeless population took part in an interactive workshop as part of the Seattle Symphony's Simple Gifts initiative. Their artworks (below and on screen, left), created in response to Charles Ives's musical evocation of America, were featured in a February 2017 concert of Ives's "Holidays" Symphony. Participants also shared thoughts that Seattle Civic Poet Claudia Castro Luna (standing left) wove into the performances. Luna read the resulting poetry before each movement, and between movements the illustrations were shown on screens.



with professional artists to write personal lullabies for their babies, supporting maternal health, aiding child development, and strengthening the bond between parent and child. In New York City, the project reaches mothers in hospitals, homeless shelters, and at Rikers Island Correctional Facility. The Lullaby Project includes sixteen national partners, among them not just the Seattle Symphony and Portland Symphony but also the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Central Ohio Symphony, and Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

cal offshoot of Carnegie Hall Weill Music Institute's Lullaby Project, which enlists musicians to help pregnant women and mothers facing hardships create lullabies for their children. "The idea is, what can musicians offer a person experiencing homelessness? Music can offer comfort that they don't have, because they don't have the comforts of a home," says Mary Lynch, Seattle's principal oboist. "Music can provide that feeling of safety—particularly in a lullaby for a child."

### Portland: Composing a Lullaby

When the Portland Symphony brought the Lullaby Project to Maine in 2015, French horn player Nina Allen Miller was one of several musicians who helped the mothers turn their feelings into songs. Not all the orchestra's members live in right in

Portland, but Miller does, something she says "makes a difference. I love to go out in the community and bring the orchestra to them." The Lullaby Project "was something I'd never done before, and I couldn't even imagine what the project would be like. It exceeded my wildest dreams on the level it tapped the community. Some of these women looked like they had just come off the streets. They were homeless and pregnant and hungry. For them to be involved in this creative process of writing a song for their child—they couldn't even imagine how that would happen. And they ended up with a performance to a crowd of people. It was amazing."

In the Lullaby Project, which falls under the "Musical Connections" portion of Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute, pregnant women and new mothers work

In Portland, much of the creative work took place in a one-day session. Each mother met with a group that typically included a songwriter, orchestral musician, and orchestra staffer. Many of the mothers were hesitant, saying they weren't musical or couldn't sing: "There were all these negative messages" to overcome, Miller says. But the groups took the project one step at a time, beginning with what the mothers knew best: their own families and emo-



Participants in the Portland Symphony Orchestra's Lullaby Project, in which pregnant women and young mothers write lullabies for their children: Sarah McLaughlin, Sherina Howard (and daughter Akira), Danielle Tardy, Kate McCarthy (and son Eamonn), April 2015. The lullabies were professionally recorded, with 1,000 CDs shared with the mothers as well as community partners and project backers. The lullabies were performed live at a free Portland Symphony community concert in May 2015.

tions. "Each mom would come up with words that were important to them, or something meaningful," Miller says. "And once we got the words together, we found a melody." Meanwhile, Tom Cabaniss—a composer and Carnegie Hall Weill Institute staffer who helped found The Lullaby Project—"went around to each group and helped us. You know, you get stuck at some point. You say, 'Where do we go from here? I want to put in this word, but it's not working.' They helped us get past the stuck points."

In Seattle, the mothers brought their cultural backgrounds into the mix. "A lot of them came from Somalia, from Eritrea," Lynch, the Seattle Symphony oboist, says. "They were able to tell us about the music from their original countries. Some of the lullabies were quite dance-like. One woman from Eritrea wrote a lullaby for her mentally handicapped son John, who loves to dance and sing. It had clapping and lots of unique rhythms she taught us." The musicians demonstrated their instruments, Lynch said, to see what resonated with the mothers. Some liked the oboe's low range; some enjoyed its crisp, perky articulation. Miller, who plays the ukulele as a sideline, used it to help the Portland teams try out their works-in-progress. Gradually, the songs took shape.

"I had never seen anything like it," Miller says. One of the mothers "looked like she had really had a tough time. I'm guessing she was maybe in her 20s. She had two other boys. One was autistic, and one had ADHD. She knew she was having another son. She called her song 'Third Time's a Charm.' She talked about her struggle

with her other two boys, and now the third was coming. The songs were so personal. It was just beautiful."

After the sessions, teaching artists arranged the songs with instrumental-ensemble accompaniment. As the project's final component, the mothers, families and other supporters came together and heard Portland Symphony members play a concert including the mothers' lullabies. Miller's day with the Lullaby Project also brought back a bit of her own life. "I had forgotten that I wrote a song for my baby when he was born, and I sang it to him for many years," Miller says. "It was a lullaby—just a song I would sing for him. One of the moms said, 'Can you sing it to us?' And I sang my Josh song. Later, I sang it again to my son. He's 25 now. He said, 'I remember you singing that song to me.' So then I knew this would make a difference in their babies' lives. And that's what it was all about."

### Nebraska and Kentucky: Musical Embraces

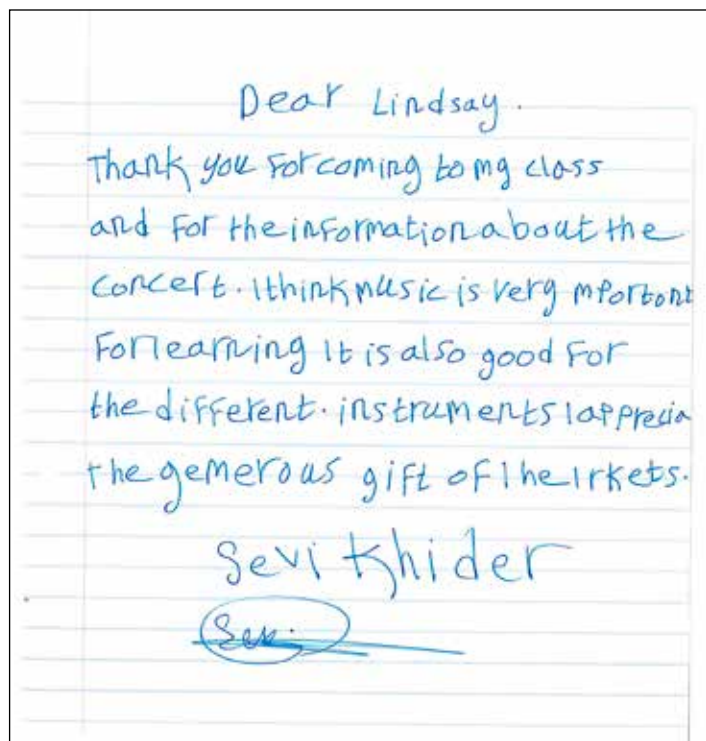
When Lincoln's Symphony Orchestra performed a family concert titled "Fairy Tale Fantasy" on Feb. 5, the audience included about 500 members of the city's immigrant and refugee communities. Sitting alongside people who may have lived in Nebraska's capital their entire lives,



At a 2015 songwriting workshop during the Portland Symphony's Lullaby Project, left to right: Portland Symphony hornist Nina Allen Miller (with ukulele), songwriter Tom Acousti, mother Kate McCarthy and son Eamonn, Carnegie Hall's Manuel Bagorro



Lincoln's Symphony Orchestra's ongoing work with Family Literacy, a collaboration between Lincoln Public Schools and community groups, helps immigrants become part of U.S. life, providing not only performance tickets but also transportation to the concert hall. Families enjoy preconcert activities such as an instrument petting zoo, face painting, and games. Right: A thank-you note to Lincoln's Symphony Orchestra Community Partnerships Manager Lindsay J. Bartlett from a participant in the orchestra's free concerts through Family Literacy.



they saw the orchestra and a puppet-theater company bring life to “The Gingerbread Man,” “Rapunzel,” and stories from around the world.

The orchestra helps newcomers become part of U.S. life through Family Literacy, a collaboration between Lincoln Public Schools and other community groups. Family Literacy focuses on about 160 children from pre-kindergarten through third grade and their families. In addition to the instruction the youngsters receive in school, the program works with the parents about ten hours a week on English as a second language, occupational training, and other topics. Since 2012, the orchestra has added a cultural literacy element to “help this community feel more connected and comfortable attending events that American families attend,” says Lindsay J. Bartlett, the orchestra’s community partnerships manager.

Before each performance, orchestra staffers and translators visit Family Literacy sites. They discuss classical-music history, the program coming up, and other topics that attune the participants to what’s in store. The orchestra provides not only performance tickets, but transportation to the concert hall, something that can be an issue for newcomers. The families arrive in plenty of time to enjoy preconcert activities such as an instrument petting zoo, face

painting and games. “Our goal is to belong to the community,” Music Director Edward Polochick says in a statement. “This is just one small way in which we can offer

**The Lincoln’s Symphony Orchestra’s Family Literacy partnership is “just one small way in which we can offer welcome and support to new members of our Lincoln community,” says Music Director Edward Polochick. “Regardless of upbringing, faith, language, or country of origin, we believe that music can speak to the deepest parts of our human experience.”**



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gin, we believe that music can speak to the deepest parts of our human experience.”

The Owensboro Symphony in Kentucky shares music’s message with people in hospitals and senior centers, as many orchestras do, but its reach goes even farther. Thanks to the orchestra’s Music On Call program, violinist Lacy Jean takes a musician or two at a time with her to Wendell Foster’s Campus, a center for people with developmental disabilities. Jean has a personal reason to connect with the audience: her own sister has mental and physical disabilities. Jean’s musical tastes range from opera and bluegrass to blues and rock, and she draws on all of that as she gauges her listeners’ reactions. “I just try to play music that I think will be fun,” Jean says. “Really varied. A little classical, a little bluegrass, a little Brian Setzer. My goal for that group has really been to take an hour, hour-and-a-half, and have a really good time.” The audiences respond to music that brings rhythm, movement and energy to the fore, Jean says. She gravitates away from pieces in minor keys. Even though many of her listeners are non-verbal, she can tell that the music reaches them. “There’s a definite positive reaction that you can sense—moving and swaying or kind of hollering,” she says. “And some are able to say, ‘Yeah!’ You feel it out. At Wendell Foster, they’re just happy to hear live music. It’s obvious,



Through the Owensboro Symphony Orchestra's Music On Call program, OSO violinist Lacy Jean takes a musician or two at a time with her to perform at Wendell Foster's Campus, a center for people with developmental disabilities.

human, energetic reaction that's easy to feel and reciprocate.

"I'll take a short break and talk to people," says Jean. "They want to touch you, hold your hand—make that connection. Then I'll do more music. And afterward, I'll end up staying quite a while. I'll communicate and kind of talk with everyone who wants to." Even if the listeners never attend an Owensboro Symphony concert, Jean sees value in performances such as these. "For the time we're together, something positive is happening—not just for them, but for me," Jean says. "I can tell by the way I feel and they feel. How many times are you sure that everything you're doing is a positive thing and helping somebody out?"

The Oregon Symphony's Carreno looks at his and his colleagues' prison performances in much the same way. He thinks back to something an inmate told him after the first concert at Coffee Creek. "They were coming up and shaking our hands and thanking us for the performance," Carreno says. "One of the inmates said, 'You know, it has been about 10 years since I saw a drum set in person or heard one.' And it sunk into me—'They don't get to hear live music, ever.' It makes it very real when you hear comments like that." During the musicians' 2016 visit, they performed with an inmates' chorus. The rehearsal had "a nice collaborative environment," Carreno says, and performing

alongside the chorus "was very special—to see them smiling and singing along and getting cheered on."

### **Chattanooga: Preparing for Life Beyond Prison**

When Chattanooga Symphony Concertmaster Holly Mulcahy visits Georgia's Walker State Prison, about 20 miles from Chattanooga, where a faith- and character-based program prepares inmates for release, she doesn't just stand up and play the violin. After every piece, she draws out the prisoners' impressions and reactions. Though inmates were wary at first, they have opened up about how pieces by composers from J.S. Bach to Jennifer Higdon resonate with their personal experiences. "When you have people who are going to be released, you want to give them every tool possible," Mulcahy says. "Sometimes the tools that are most important are what makes us human. That's creating art and interpreting art in any form. It's expressing human qualities and having them focus on life in a different way. We're finding that this two-way con-

**Even if the listeners never attend an Owensboro Symphony concert, Owensboro Symphony violinist Lacy Jean sees value in performances such as these. "For the time we're together, something positive is happening—not just for them, but for me." Jean says. "I can tell by the way I feel and they feel."**


versation is working. It's not just a performance for performance's sake. It's an interactive experience that really works out emotions and thoughts and helps people feel good."

The comments from inmates bring up "heavy, heavy stuff," Mulcahy says. She thinks back to playing a Bach sarabande that included tense, unsettled harmony near the beginning, but ultimately reached a resolution. An inmate said it took him back to sitting in a Red Lobster restaurant with his girlfriend. His phone rang,



Chattanooga Symphony Orchestra  
 Concertmaster Holly Mulcahy performs at the  
 Walker State Faith and Character Based Prison  
 in Rock Spring, Georgia.

and a DEA agent told him that officers were coming to pick him up. He was going to prison. At that moment, “his heart just sank,” Mulcahy says. “Life couldn’t possibly get any worse than that moment. Of course, getting to prison *was* worse. But at Walker (prison), he got focus. He feels relaxed. He’s got an idea what he’s going to do when he gets out. That mirrored exactly the music I had just played. And he found the connection. It was so un-prompted—to see it and share it. I’ll never play that piece the same. I’ll never hear it the same.”

Chattanooga Symphony patrons who serve as mentors at the prison drew Mulcahy into this project, she says, but now she hopes to expand it to other institutions. To help her make sure that her programs meet the prisoners’ needs, she asks the inmates to fill out comment forms. They’re also powerful, she says. “It’s in their own handwriting. A person writes, ‘I had to wait until prison to experience this kind of music.’ To see that written out in their hand—it’s real. It’s real.” 

STEVEN BROWN, a Houston writer specializing in classical music and the arts, is the former classical music critic of the *Orlando Sentinel*, *Charlotte Observer*, and *Houston Chronicle*.

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