

# Witness

an online magazine

## Project Music: Not A Single Dissonant Note

Photographs & Text by Richard Falco

# PROJECT MUSIC

## Not a Single Dissonant Note

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by

Richard Falco

Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind,  
flight to imagination and life to everything.

-- Plato

The notes rolled chaotically along the colorfully painted walls from different directions. Each classroom was comprised of two to four children, ranging in age from 8-13, along with a music instructor. As the instruments dangled from the mouth of each child, the teacher focuses their attention on the sheet music in front of them. It was almost 5:30 p.m., but no one was leaving.

In a larger room down the hall, another group of students works through a song conducted by Artistic Director Garret Mendez. This mixed group of about twenty older inner-city kids from Stamford, Connecticut, are practicing a series of songs they have been working on all week. Mendez prods and corrects them. Occasionally he picks up his trombone to demonstrate a section of the piece. They watch and listen as the sound fills the room. Moments later, Mendez lifts his baton and the music begins again.

Music Instructor Joe Kozlowski, works with two young students at the Chester Addison Community Center. (top right)

Colin Walters gives a clarinet lesson to a student at the Chester Addison Community Center. (bottom right)



These children and instructors are part of the not-for-profit organization called Project Music. Project Music is the brain-child of the well-established jazz pianist and educator Joyce DeCamillo. DeCamillo became concerned that inner-city children from economically deprived areas did not have access to the arts, and particularly music.

Studies have shown that music accelerates cognitive abilities and can have a tremendous impact on brain development. “Through all of the communication technology that humans have created, there is still a very basic and very powerful tool for communicating, one that is accessible to people on every level of functioning and that is music,” says Dr. Tina Brescia, of the Music Therapy Institute in New York. “Music therapists have discovered that the structures inherent in music can be used to engage and maintain attention and to encourage response and role expectations. Music is a social art and as such the act of making music with another encourages positive social interactions. Involvement in music is a creative process that offers people opportunities to express difficult emotions through positive means. Music is experienced on both sides of the brain and is able to stimulate cognitive functioning. It is also very useful in assisting with the development of some speech and language skills.”<sup>1</sup>

Unlike any other art form, music has the ability to touch everyone. It is a universal language that enables anyone to emotionally feel and respond without any other knowledge or learning.

“As a professional musician, I realized that the children in Stamford were not getting the access and opportunity I had gotten as a young student. Project Music had actually existed in another iteration. It had been started by my music teacher, who had become a State Senator, Anthony Truglia,” says DeCamillo. “That program over the years morphed out of the inner city into other areas of the town, but now the inner-city children wind up having nothing. Eventually the program was completely cut. So there was really a void.”

DeCamillo then proceeded to get some people together, Chistel Truglia, Anthony Truglia’s wife, and others, in order to recreate Project Music.

Rehearsing at the Addison Community Center. (right)





Joyce DeCamillo at the piano in her home.

At the same time that DeCamillo was trying to revive the program, she learned about El Sistema. El Sistema was founded by José Antonio Abreu in 1975 to help impoverished Venezuelan children learn to play musical instruments and be part of an orchestra. Over the next four decades, El Sistema became a nationwide network of youth orchestras, choirs, and music centers. The program provides a free music education. Today, El Sistema has become an international organization. More than 750,000 young musicians have participated in the program. Its mission is to support and grow a worldwide movement of programs that effect social change through music for children with the fewest resources and the greatest need.<sup>2</sup>

DeCamillo was also having a number of conversations with Garrett Mendez, who was also Director of Instrumental Music at the King School in Stamford. Mendez had been involved in El Sistema music education for a number of years. He even travelled to Venezuela to understand the movement more clearly. “Mendez talked about the importance of how El Sistema transforms lives,” says DeCamillo, “and how it has changed the lives and lifted thousands of children out of poverty all over the world.” Because of the changing demographics within Stamford, they felt that they needed to do something new and different. Together they decided to use El Sistema as the model for Project Music.

Using her connections to people within the city, DeCamillo reached out to the Mayor of Stamford’s wife, Judy Martin, for help. Martin brought the program to the attention of her husband, David Martin, who put money in the city’s budget to start the program in 2014. The group then sought out other individuals, organizations, and foundations for further funding.

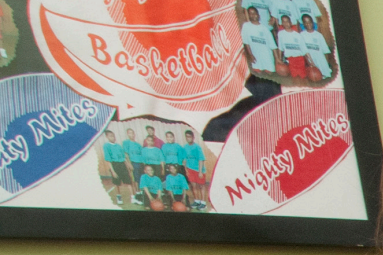
After reading Malcolm Gladwell’s Ten-Thousand Hour Rule, DeCamillo felt that the secret behind the philosophy of Project Music must be immersion. The rule holds that 10,000 hours of “deliberate practice” are needed to become world-class in any field. This principle is used by Project Music which is an after-school program that runs for an hour and a half, four days a week. “We are giving these students a discipline, whether they know it or not, whether they want it or not, by simply coming to this program 4 days a week. That is because a lot of immersion in something impacts



Flute lessons at the Trailblazers Academy.



Artistic Director Garret Mendez leads a group rehearsal at the Addison Center.



Project Music instructor Julie Lee rehearses with a student at the Addison Center.



them. If you swing a bat for an hour a day you are going to get better. If you play your piano for an hour a day you are going to get better. And these children are getting better,” says DeCamillo.

Project Music is now in a partnership with Domus. Domus is a human services nonprofit which opened in 1972 and serves more than 1,100 of the most struggling youth in Stamford.<sup>3</sup> Domus runs the Chester Addison Community Center, where Project Music is located. Domus supplies free food and snacks and has busing in place to bring the students from different locations around city to the Addison Center. “The program took off right way,” says DeCamillo. “The children started to gravitate to what we were doing and engaged in it totally.”

Many inner-city communities around the country are struggling with what is referred to as the education ‘achievement gap.’ The achievement gap is the disparity in school performance between groups of students based on race, gender, and socioeconomic status. In the state of Connecticut, the problem is escalating to unprecedented proportions. Recent reports show

that Connecticut, made up of some of the wealthiest and poorest areas, has the largest academic achievement gap in the United States. A student’s socioeconomic background plays a big role in that.<sup>4</sup>

After-school programs help address the student-performance problem by supplementing the regular school day with academic support, cultural enrichment, and a safe recreational environment. This is particularly true for individuals and families from low and middle income neighborhoods. These programs also help fight crime by keeping kids off the streets and molding them into successful individuals.

DeCamillo believes that “very often the classroom setting doesn’t reach the student. So what we do musically has a tendency to reach the student in a more powerful and impactful way and it gives them other tools that they can use -- things that they know work. We get to introduced them to many different facets of learning.” Mendez takes this concept a step further

Students can have both individual and group practice sessions at the Addison Center.







Students work on their homework with a tutor supplied by Domus.

in that he believes that, “music has the ability to unite communities in a way that nothing else can . . . it opens the world to communicate with one another.”

With the change in demographics, lower income students are now in the majority in the school system. “We have to deal with a demographic that has significant challenges in their daily life and that can manifest itself in many different ways. Our teachers . . . really work with these children to make them good citizens. I think that is one of the most important by-products of Project Music,” says DeCamillo.

Many educators, sociologists, community leaders, and members of law enforcement, have found that the most dangerous hours of the day for children are when school lets out and before their parents come home from work. A positive after school program can remove the child from the pressure of potentially negative or bad environments.

Project Music works out of two locations, the Chester Addison Community Center and the Trailblazers Academy Middle School.

The students begin arriving at the Addison Center from different parts of the city between 3:00-4:00 p.m. They will spend the next hour working in groups with teachers, counselors, and tutors on their homework or getting extra help on other academic or personal issues. “Our counselors work with our students on reading, math, science and everything else they might be having trouble with,” says Michael Hyman, the Director of the Addison Center for Domus. The students then move to their individual music instruction classes for an hour and a half or to the larger ensemble rehearsal. Forty students, in grades 2-8, rehearse Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday.

Ian Taylor, the Executive Director of Project Music came to the program because he felt he could apply his knowledge as a music educator to a program that had more social impact. “We are trying to change the rules of access and possibility . . . and who would be inspired by their surroundings.” he says. “Many of our students are immigrants or come from poorer backgrounds where buying instruments and getting private study wasn’t a possibility and maybe was not even something they thought of even asking for we put it in front of them.”



A Domus tutor works with a student before music lessons begin.



Students in both the Domus Program and Project Music will work together with tutors, teachers, counselors, and, when need be, social workers. Everything from homework, extra help with academics, or other personal issues is addressed.

Julie Lee, who was born in Korea, is a teacher at Project Music. She has had first-hand experience in the transformative power of music. As a child growing up, she often felt that she did not fit in and spent a great deal of time alone. “When I was young, I didn’t know how important music was to me until I became an adult. Now I realize it was a kind of ‘saving grace’ because without it, I would be a different person. I would not have the self-awareness and confidence I have now. I want to share that experience with



kids who are struggling. I know that music and anything that has a creative outlet is really important . . . I want that cathartic experience for the kids I teach right now.”

“When we are looking for a teacher,” says Mendez, “we are not just looking for a good musician, but someone who can engage the student, who guides them and has an interest in the student as a person in a way that is mindful to the child’s other needs.”



Students prepare and warm up in the large rehearsal room at Addison Center. They work on songs under the leadership of Artistic Director Garrett Mendez. They will practice for an hour and a half.



Project Music's Artistic Director Garrett Mendez conducts as the more advanced students rehearse a song.



The way students chose their instrument is by going through an exploratory period where they are allowed to try every instrument and are rotated through all the different teachers. They are taught the rudimentary

components about how to produce a sound for each instrument. The child then chooses which one they want to learn.



Project Music's Executive Director Ian Taylor sorts through music for the day's lesson. (top left) Instructor, Julie Lee, gives a flute lesson to two of her students. (bottom right)

“One of the biggest concepts we have at Project Music,” say Mendez, “is teaching the children how to learn. We do it through instrumental development. In order to play a piece of music you need to go from point A to point B. It is a very important sequence they need to follow and by learning the sequence they can apply it to all other education.”

At the Trailblazers Academy, there are 60 middle-school students. “For kids to have the opportunity to play in a music ensemble, it not only changes the way that they think, it changes the way that they interact with

people because they have to produce this collaborative project with others. Everything we do is as a team. It is not competitive. It is a group effort that is trying to create something beautiful together. We hope that the children will take that mode of thinking into their whole life and extend that cooperative mindset to all that they do,” says Taylor. “Rehearsing everyday makes this a definitive part of their lives, where they can grow up identifying as a musician and knowing that they are an artist who has something artistic and valuable to contribute to the world.”

Helder Passinho, a visiting artist, who has been very involved with El Sistema in Brazil says, “The main benefit of practicing music in a group is that it does not matter where you come from, it does not matter how much money you have, it does not matter the color of your skin. We are all together and everybody needs everybody. But we have to be together listening to one another to be able to create music, to create beauty. And after working with music in a group, we bring those values to our own life,





Ian Taylor works with a student at the Trailblazers Academy Middle School.

to our reality, to our routine. And learn that diversity, being all together, being patient, and being on the same page as everybody else, is going to make a difference and create a better future and a better life for everybody.”

The students also participate in music residences that can last four days. These are structured events that enable the students to meet, play, rehearse, and connect with students from other programs and cities. Throughout the year, visiting conductors, professional musicians, and teachers from around the world are brought in to work with the students. “We bring in visiting artists,” says Mendez, “because these individuals have a specialty in a particular genre of music or cultural style and we want to introduce the student to a new cultural experiences.”

One of the visiting musicians, Everton Isidore Santos Silva, often tries to share his own story with the students. Silva came from an environment that was poor and dangerous. He didn’t have a lot of opportunities because

Instructor Joseph Kozlowski watches as students go through a piece.





A flute lesson at the Trailblazers Academy.





Project Misis instructor Owen Caprell works with a student at the Trailblazers Academy.



Students practice in the auditorium at the Trailblazers Academy.



Visiting Conductor Marcos Rangel leads a group of students from Project Music, Baltimore Symphony OrchKids, Bravo Waterbury, Archipelago, Intake and King School. The group has been brought together for four-day seminar entitled El Sistema: Building and Connecting Communities Through Music. Guest artists are brought in to conduct and teach 'master classes' throughout the program. The program culminates with a concert, open to the public, at the King Center Auditorium.



access to education was too expensive. “I was lost, but the music brought me to a different place. Music changed my life.” As the students watch and react to his movements as a percussionist, they are captivated by his talent. “You need to show a sense of passion in front of the kids. I like to teach the kids how to feel the music . . . the paper is a kind of map to show us where to go . . . but I think you make the music when you open your heart to the music. The difference between you and other musicians is the feeling you put into the music. Music has to be a part of life. You have to live the music, not just play it.”

In March, the residency was titled: *Building and Connecting Communities Through Music*. The purpose of the residency was to bring together students from all around the country from very different socio-economics backgrounds and different cultural backgrounds to play music together in an ensemble setting. “Making music together creates a doorway for us to start communicating and building relationships,” says Mendez. “What they see is that everyone is equal, everybody starts to see each other in a different

light. There is no barrier of culture or money. We have a common goal in what we are trying to create. At the core, this is what José Antonio Abreu wanted to achieve. Making music together give us a path forward. In a world where we seem so divided and unable to listen to each other, the music forces us to listen . . . we don’t have to agree with one another on all the concepts, but there is a way in which we can agree to try and create something together . . . to create a common goal. And when we create a common goal, we can put some of the differences aside.”

Another visiting artist, Guilherme Teixeira, says, “I want the children to remember that music is movement, and that the only way to make music is to be able to reach someone else’s heart.”

“The program has really expanded the world for a lot of the students who have traveled with us. Whenever we go somewhere, not only do they visit and see the sites, they represent themselves in a way that the community appreciates and respects them in every town we show up in. They get to show what they have accomplished rather than just seeing what other people do somewhere elsewhere,” says Taylor. He feels that the goal for any honest teacher is that the student becomes a better musician than





Visiting Conductor Marcos Rangel gives a Master Class to the students at the King Center.

their teacher. This will become a source of pride and a validation. “We hope that the performances that the kids play at all over town can help change the image and stigma that their neighborhoods might have. Whereas now,

if they can go out and be impressive, respectable, artistic, and share their voice with the community in a really positive way, the community can feed that energy back into them and start to believe in what they can do.”



Students work together with the visiting artist, Guilherme Teixeira, for a Master Class.







A spontaneous jam session breaks out at a seminar at the King Center.

In the first three years of its existence, Project Music students played over forty performances. Over the next few years, Taylor hopes to expand the program because he knows that they are not reaching all the students who need a program like this or students who want one. “We are still limited

in space and funds and how many teachers we have, but I’d like to see us grow where we can reach all the schools in the area and offer this to all the kids that are hungry for this kind of knowledge so that every student who wants to be a musician can be a musician.”





Professional musicians, teachers, and students improvise at the King Center.









Students from Project Music, Baltimore Symphony OrchKids, Bravo Waterbury, Archipelago, Intake, and the King School perform a concert at the King Center Auditorium.

DeCamillo believes that the program, “gives them [the children] a sense of self-confidence. That levels the playing field for them . . . it truly does change their lives. And once again, there are things about music that you have for the rest of your life. Most of these children won’t go with music but they will always have a love of music and the joy that making music

gives you and they will pass that down to their children . . . so it will be a whole bunch of generations coming up who will feel the impact of programs like Project Music. I always say, it’s access, opportunity and inspiration ... because if you have that you can go on and pay it forward.”



This project is a production of

## **Richard Falco**

Richard Falco is President of Vision Project. For the past thirty years he has worked as a photographer, filmmaker, and journalist. He has had assignments on four continents in over thirty-five countries and has worked for many major magazines, including *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Geo*, *Life Magazine*, *New York Times*, *US News & World Report*, to name a few. There are two published books of Mr. Falco's work: *Medics: A Documentation of Paramedics in the Harlem Community* and *To Bear Witness/ September 11*, and two eBooks: *Hunger and Rice in Asia* and *Witchcraft: Ancient Traditions Alive In Salem*. He is the director of the films *Crossroads: Rural Health Care In America* and *Holding Back the Surge*, and is the executive producer of *Josie: A Story About Williams Syndrome* and *Dorothea's Tears: The State of Mental Health Care in America*.

Mr. Falco has twenty-five years of teaching experience. He has taught and lectured at a number of universities and institutions, notably, The New School for Social Research, the State University of New York at Purchase College, New York Film Academy, and the School of Visual Arts. He is presently Coordinator of Multimedia Journalism in the Masters in Communication Program at Sacred Heart University and the director of all of Vision Project's educational programming.

1. Dr. Tina Brescia, "The Music Therapist." *Witness Magazine*, Spring 2011
2. El Sistema USA, <https://elsistemausa.org/about/>
3. Domus, <http://domuskids.org/about-us/>
4. Ariane Rasmussen, "A Clear Path: Confronting the Education Achievement Gap," *Witness Magazine*, Fall 2012

## **VISION PROJECT Inc.**

Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of investigative journalism, documentary photography, multimedia, film, and education.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

Vision Project seeks to reinforce the social, cultural, and historical impact documentary work contributes to society. To reach these goals, we have assembled a group of talented professionals with extensive expertise in journalism, photography, video, design, web technology, and education.

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