

KEYS

Behind Bars

By Catherine Kautsky

My grandma was a piano teacher, so that had a big impact on how I felt about playing. Did any of you study with family members?”

“I’m a woodwind player, so I always got to carry my instrument with me. Is it hard to deal with a different instrument every time you perform?”

“As a violinist, I was always super self-conscious about every mistake I made, even though I knew that others often didn’t notice. Does that happen to you as well?”

Those were just a few of the many questions my students were asked at a recent concert they gave. I bet you’re imagining a well-clad audience of upper-middle-class folks gathered in a small recital hall following a springtime recital. That’s the classical music scene, right?

Wrong. The 100 men in front of us wore green prison garb and were sta-

tioned on risers in a prison gym. We were alone in the center of the massive gym; just us and a grand piano. We’d arrived that morning filled with good intentions—and nervous as hell. It didn’t help that we’d all had to go through background checks, that we had to pass through metal detectors before entering, that anyone wearing an underwire bra had to strip, that all belongings had to be locked up and that cell phones couldn’t even enter the building. Plus the door guards were none too friendly. They were more like German shepherds than golden retrievers waiting to greet us—no tails wagging; they were unimpressed by our good intentions.

This was the first of three concerts I’d arranged for my Lawrence Conservatory students to give at the nearby medium-security penitentiary. I’d done similar concerts at a different prison a decade ago while teaching at a different institution and remembered them as enormously successful, but only when an alum from that earlier group told me they were life-changing was I fully determined to repeat the experience.

Over several years I tried to contact one prison warden after another. The farthest I got was a polite note from one saying he had to decline. The others didn’t even respond. After all, a prison warden has a lot on his or her mind other than 19-year-olds traipsing in to provide a bit of Mozart, so I wasn’t all that surprised. Then, out of the blue, months after my latest

inquiries had gone out, I got an email, saying, “Yes, we’d like to try this.” I had a week to secure a piano, arrange for the piano move, find a date and make sure my students were up for the challenge. Miraculously, everything came together. The local music store, Heid Music Company, has an active community engagement program, and they agreed, virtually overnight, to donate the rental of a Yamaha grand. Unfortunately, their movers couldn’t afford to be as generous, so I still had to find hundreds of dollars in funding to cover the piano move. My mind raced with the arguments against such an expenditure—was this really the best use of university outreach funds?

I don’t know the answer to that one. Perhaps if we could instead have saved some kids from fatal disease or starvation that would have been preferable, but this is an imperfect world, and I knew this was important work. We determined that it was simplest to move the piano in and out in one day, but reach as many prisoners as possible during that time period. And so we arranged three concerts, with different performers and different audiences at each one.

Only three of my students performed at the first concert, but they were all upperclassmen, excellent pianists, excellent speakers and comfortable in their own skins. We’d all practiced a lot. Music was chosen carefully; we tried for music that would grab a listener at first hearing, but with no dumbing-down—this wasn’t a pops

Catherine Kautsky,
professor of
music and chair
of keyboard
at Lawrence
University in
Appleton,
Wisconsin, has performed on
every continent. Her recording
of the Debussy Preludes was
recently issued by Centaur and her
book on Parisian social history is
forthcoming in September 2017.



concert. We'd given a lot of thought to pre-performance words, with the absolute proviso that nothing would be read; this was a conversation, not a lecture. What could we say that would make the music come alive? Everyone had rehearsed their introduction, but I could see that my kids were feeling extremely shaky, and not a one said what they'd planned to say. And I was none-too-secure myself. What if all this time, money, preparation and pre-concert hype had been misguided? I had many fears. What if everyone attending hated classical music and had come only because hearing Beethoven beat scrubbing latrines? What if we were seen as (or, worse yet, really were) just privileged, rich, white do-gooders taking an hour off from our luxurious private college routine to grace the lower classes with our superior taste and culture? And what if my students felt threatened by men whose violent pasts might be in evidence even as they sat before us?

No question we'd all conjured up plenty of worries. I can't pinpoint the moment at which those worries began to dissipate. I think it must have happened for me when I decided I could talk along with my students. And there was plenty to say, though none of it was pre-planned. The first student played Schumann's *Kreisleriana*, and I realized we could speak of Schumann's mental illness, his terrifying oscillations between sanity and insanity. The next played Debussy's *La Soirée dans Grenade* and *Puerta del Vino*, and now I wanted to speak about Orientalism and a French culture transfixed by other nations, but also intent on dominating them. Later, a student played Rzewski's *Down by the Riverside*, and after we all sang "We ain't gonna study war no more," we talked about the politics of Rzewski's music and the reasons for his voluntary exile from this country, his native land. Suddenly it was clear that the issues of illness, domination and alienation that so affected these composers were issues

that spoke to composers, to performers and to any and every audience. It was clear too that we'd made our point. Heads were nodding; bodies were swaying as the students played, and once questions began, the conversation on both sides could hardly stop. Students expected grit and harshness; they found empathy, curiosity, knowledge and engagement. Our stereotypes bit the dust. As one alum, who worked on community outreach at Carnegie Hall, wrote me afterward, "We have heard artists say many times (and seen it for ourselves) that the audiences in prisons, in particular, are the most appreciative and engaged groups for whom they've ever performed." Why? Yes, that was our experience. Why? Is it because prisoners are so deprived of meaningful interactions that they become unusually receptive when offered some small nugget of entertainment? Is it because the same sort of inner conflict and even violence that can lead to crime can make one particularly receptive to art? Is it because people filled with remorse are particularly open to the salve of beautiful music? I don't know the answer, I only know the reality.

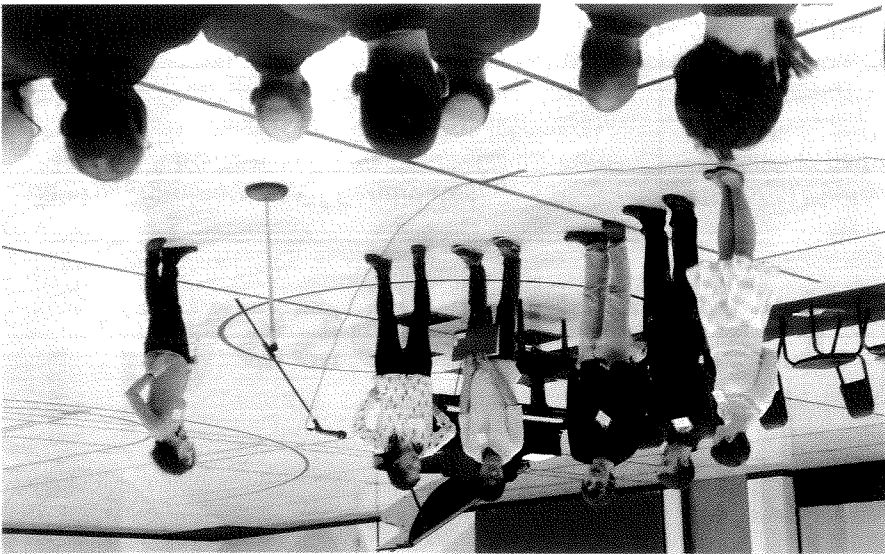
And I know it's a two-way street. As my alum went on to eloquently state, "People who are incarcerated are too often only seen as criminals and denied some of the most basic

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aspects of being human, including experiences that allow them to feel hope or feel loved. Providing them with music gives them a chance to remember they are more than their mistakes and someone cares." For my students, being the purveyor of that grace was transformative. How often do we get to remember why exactly it is that we became musicians in the first place? Surely not to impress our peers with flawless scales or to persuade our parents their hard-earned money was well-spent. As one student said, "I saw so much joy there, and that was beautiful for me." That IS why we're in this, and we all felt very, very lucky to be so viscerally reminded.

I just recently received thank-you notes in the mail. "It was a wonderful occasion to have you and your talented young pianists play for us. It's remarkable that they braved the cold of a Wisconsin winter, left their comfort zone far behind, walked through the lovely razor-wire fences and stood before incarcerated men...."

I do think my students were remarkable. So is the person who wrote that letter. How extraordinary that they were able to meet. The complexity of people's minds and lives defies all categorization, and it can never hurt to share a bit of beauty against all odds.



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