Lawrence Today, 2017

May 3 was a big day for my piano studio. On that day, we moved from the Lawrence bubble to the Oshkosh Correctional Institute. We weren’t incarcerated, but we did cross barbed wire fences, metal detectors, and all manner of other screening devices. We were there to perform for the inmates, and we gave three, one- hour-long concerts in a single day, with audiences ranging from about 75-100 prisoners each.   This is the second year I’ve taken students to the Oshkosh Penitentiary.  Both years we were lucky enough to have the piano rental donated by Heid Music Co. and to have the piano move covered by Pieper funds.  Although we obviously could have provided some semblance of a concert with just a portable keyboard, it was very important to me that this be a real concert, with both players and audience feeling the electricity of serious performance.  Students played their very best and were rewarded by an audience that was completely engaged. Repertoire covered ranged from Beethoven (Sonata Op. 26) to Schumann (Abegg Variations) to Ravel (Scarbo) to ragtime, and there was not a dumbed-down moment.

The concerts were enormously successful, with prisoners giving students a standing ovation and asking literally dozens of questions ranging from choice of repertoire and amount of practice time to very specific inquiries about pieces. At each concert students were asked whether they also composed (sadly, they generally don’t, though some do study jazz and improv!), and whether they liked other kinds of music than classical (they do!). We were lucky enough to have several international students from China participating, and there were always lively discussions about the differences in musical education between the US and China. (Answer in a nutshell: Chinese kids have to practice more!) Questions flew, ranging from queries about women composers to thoughts about different makes of pianos, and answers were delivered with equal enthusiasm.

The energy here was palpable. I think that both prisoners and students were moved, not only by the music, but also by the sheer unexpected human contact. One prisoner got up and thanked us, saying “we know that most people wouldn’t bother to come play music for convicted felons.”  We, on the other hand, felt privileged to have our stereotypes debunked, to learn that what we do, day in and day out, reaches out and touches others well outside the walls of Lawrence.  Each year I’ve gotten thank you notes from both prisoners and students because this experience takes us all way beyond the routines of our daily lives.  Whether it’s one of my students reminding prisoners that the manic-depressive Schumann too “had issues” or another brilliantly explaining the construction of a rag, there was reaching out here on every side.  As one student wrote me, “That was an incredible experience I will never forget…[it made me] realize that …I want to use music to bring joy and beauty into a place where it may only seem dark.   I want it to bring peace and hope to those who listen.”   A prisoner wrote” It’s remarkable that [your students] left their comfort zone far behind, walked through lovely razor-wire fences, and stood before incarcerated me.”  Another wrote that “this was the first recital I have ever attended… The music was awesome.”

I think it was awesome for all concerned.  So awesome that next year, on the prison’s request, the Conservatory will be doing a whole series of concerts at the prison, 5 concerts scattered throughout the year and ranging from jazz to choir to flute, viola, brass, voice, and, of course, once again, piano. Nothing could make me happier. How wonderful to remember that classical music is not a genre reserved for the rich, elite, and privileged; the people on both sides of the bleachers in this prison gym provided incontrovertible evidence of its power to move anyone, anywhere.