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## Rhythm and boost

**At the state's only long-term facility for girls, an ensemble's visit is a welcome break**

**By Russell Contreras, Globe Staff | February 18, 2007**

CHELMSFORD -- Mozart and Irving Berlin have the floor, and the girls mostly listen.

Then, as the Sarasa Chamber Music Ensemble moves to other Broadway tunes and classics, some of the girls break out in dance, sing along, laugh out loud, ask questions.

To Vivaldi, a couple of girls perform popular hip-hop dances.

To Schubert, some improvise ballet moves.

To a Chopin nocturne, a few close their eyes and think about a far away place, any place but here.

For the 15 or so girls at the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps Fay A. Rotenberg School, the ensemble's visits are a needed break, school officials say. Some of the girls and young women, ages 13 to 20, are at the school because they've been charged with crimes, including theft and assault. Others have experienced sexual abuse, homelessness, incarcerated parents, and prostitution.

They are referred by the state Department of Youth Services to the Rotenberg School, which is the only long-term, secure treatment facility for girls in Massachusetts. While they're at the school, they attend classes, earn their GED, and receive therapy. A stay averages eight months, but can range from six to 36 months.

Mary Harte, Rotenberg's program director, said the school was designed for more serious offenders. "But, generally," she said, "our population are those who weren't successful in other settings."

So, during these specially scheduled ensemble visits, girls have a chance to break away from their intense curriculum and learn the basics of rhythm. They learn about harmony, play the drums, and listen closely to the words of songs they've never heard before.

Maria, one of the residents at the Rotenberg School, said she looks forward to the visits because she has a good time and always learns something. (The last names of the girls in this story cannot be used because they are classified as juveniles by the state.)

"I like that we can express ourselves and like, learn types of music and enjoy it, and like, could have a good time and not be scared that someone is going to judge us," Maria said.

That's the point of the visits, said Tim Merton, a cellist and artistic director of the Sarasa Chamber Music Ensemble. The Cambridge-based group consists of North American and European musicians who perform for diverse communities that normally don't have the chance to hear classical music.

For six years, Merton said, the group has been involved in "residencies" where ensemble members use classical music to encourage teenagers to compare types of music while writing their own lyrics and addressing personal issues. Sometimes, the teenagers compose their own songs that deal with racism, hate, violence, and relationships.

It may be years, Merton said, before anyone knows the effects of the ensemble's visits to the Rotenberg School. Maybe the music is opening doors. Maybe it's motivating the girls to dream; maybe it's just a form of relaxation. "I think you never know all that's happening," Merton said.

But he said he believes the music and the lessons help build confidence. "Our songs are motivational, and they sometimes are about women that they could learn to admire."

To make a connection to music the girls know, Merton will mention salsa and hip-hop to show how musical traditions have evolved. The discussion of the music often draws an excited reaction from girls who sometimes start dancing and singing before the ensemble plays any tunes.

Susan Consoli, the ensemble's soprano, said she picks tunes that the girls probably have never heard but with which they could easily identify. "We try to give them something they can relate to," she said.

During a recent visit, Consoli and fellow singer Nathan Troup performed the duet "Anything You Can Do," from Berlin's musical "Annie Get Your Gun." In the middle of the duet, two groups of girls joined in singing. One group sang along with the male part, the other the female one.

Following the duet, mini-drums were passed out, and girls grabbed a quick lesson on how to organize beats. After some basic introductions, each girl broke out in a solo.

Consoli then moved to calm the mood with a solo rendition of "Part of Your World," from the movie "The Little Mermaid." It's a song about someone just trying to fit in in a normal world.

When's it my turn? Wouldn't I love Love to explore that shore above? Out of the sea Wish I could be Part of that world. None of the girls spoke while Consoli sang.

Harte said she believes the visits have rubbed off on the girls and given them some confidence.

Angela, another resident at the school, said she really enjoys the Broadway tunes. She especially liked the ensemble's interpretations of "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off" and "Anything You Can Do."

But her favorite part of the visits? The dancing.

"I like the way that we were dancing," she said. "We have fun. You dance to the music, and it was fun."

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