



A JOYFUL NOISE IN THE 'HOOD

Orchestra of St. Luke's hopes to cool things out in Hell's Kitchen

By Leah Swann Hollingsworth

Hell's Kitchen is a place of transition. Once a slum described in the 1880s as the "lowliest and filthiest in the city" by a police officer, now its new high rises tower into the air, shimmering in the sun and offering every amenity imaginable—quite literally overshadowing the thousands of square feet of still-occupied public or low-income housing. The neighborhood has two Title I schools and hundreds of families on welfare, with kids who can't afford the pricier after-school programs that those living in the new high-rises might attend.

But the **Orchestra of St. Luke's** plans to address this discrepancy, using music to bridge the growing socio-economic gap in Hell's Kitchen.

In March 2011, the DiMenna Center for Classical Music opened as OSL's permanent Manhattan home and the city's first space dedicated to classical music rehearsal, recording, and education. Most importantly, the DiMenna Center is a home for the orchestra, grounding the OSL in the notorious neighborhood known as Hell's Kitchen.

New York City boasts thousands of arts and music programs, and yet there remain kids who don't have access, who have never held a violin or a paintbrush or heard a live

performance or traveled to a museum. The Orchestra of St. Luke's wants to change that. The performance and education organization has been researching what that means, given the resources the Orchestra has to offer.

Indeed, after a six-month community needs assessment and various meetings with orchestra members, city council members, the orchestra's board, local afterschool programs, and Hell's Kitchen schools, it became clear that the OSL had a role to play. Inspired both by the famous El Sistema program in Venezuela, and its offshoots throughout the United States and around the globe, as well as outstanding community music schools and independent teachers in New York, the OSL launched a pilot program last summer: the **Youth Orchestra of St. Luke's (YOSL)**.

For the program, the OSL partnered with the Police Athletic League (PAL), New York City's largest independent youth development nonprofit organization that operates head start programs, day care, after-school programs, evening teen programs, summer day camp, and more for children from preschool through age 19.

The Hell's Kitchen PAL location was immediately interested in a partnership

with OSL and Jennifer Kessler, director of community and education for OSL, reports that it was a natural fit. "[The staff at the PAL center] really get it," she says. "We are all on the same page about what we want for the kids."

Starting in September, PAL and YOSL opened its doors four days a week to youth currently enrolled in the fourth to sixth grades for a string-orchestra program facilitated by administrators from OSL, one lead teaching artist, and select OSL musicians who visit on a weekly basis.

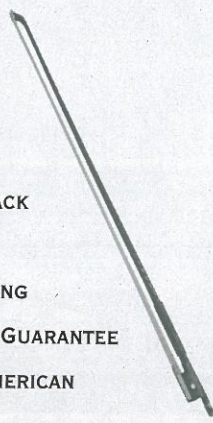
Although the program is focused on instrumental learning and ensemble playing in a way that is similar to El Sistema, Kessler, who has spent significant time in

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—Jennifer Kessler

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Venezuela herself, warns against direct parallels. "El Sistema means a lot of different things to different people," she says. "However, every single program reflects the community around it—which is the most important part—and as a result, the programs are all really different from each other.

"We are striving to do just that—reflect the needs of the community around us, first and foremost, not to build a program that is an exact replica of some other program."

Enrollment for YOSL remains open, and 15 kids are currently involved. The overall goals of the program—to connect all kids and families in Hell's Kitchen through music, despite socio-economic status—are lofty, but the immediate plan is to start small, assess along the way, keep an eye to the needs of the community and organization, and make sure that the program grows thoughtfully.

The idea is to welcome older kids next—unique among similar programs that tend to start with youngsters and then slowly add grade levels. Kessler explains that the middle-school population is actually the most at risk for dropping out of music. Kessler hopes that if YOSL starts at the fourth grade and then expands to include middle schoolers, they will be able to keep these kids involved in music.

Certainly the administration has its heart in the right place, but there have already been bumps along the way—primarily the disappointment that the enrollment for their summer program did not draw at all from the Hell's Kitchen population—but also the realization that creating the kind of community and environment that the OSL team desires is tricky. "We have in our minds what we want to do and we've hired an extraordinary teacher who believes in it and embodies it," Kessler says, "but there's a paradigm shift that needs to happen in this program . . . We are looking to create a spirit of joy and excitement in the room, kids who cannot wait to play their instruments.

And that culture takes a lot to develop—it demands a commitment of the music teacher, our staff, the PAL staff, the parents, the students, the teaching artists—everyone involved.

"And we're working really hard to develop that culture."