

## **Building a New Conservatory the American Way**

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BETWEEN his sensational debut in 1781 and his premature death in 1805, among the stack of plays, verses and histories that he produced, the German writer Friedrich Schiller also found time to think about the link between arts education and civic education. For Schiller the connection was obvious.

Although some of his contemporaries thought so, too, including Thomas Jefferson, the well-known architect, prose stylist and amateur violinist, the connection has never been obvious to the United States Congress, most state legislatures or countless school boards. But Americans have never entirely dismissed it, either.

Today, Schiller's "On the Aesthetic Education of Man" is tough going even for a Ph.D. candidate in German. Yet its traces can be seen in contemporary American translation, from Wes Craven's film "Music of the Heart" to the new conservatory complex in this Middle American metropolis, which once elected Jerry Springer mayor.

Historically, Americans have envied the public largess that Europeans used to consider normal. Today, as their own baby-boomers age, health costs climb and economies stagnate, Europeans increasingly ask how Americans manage so well without it.

Mr. Craven's homage to Roberta Guaspari's landmark Suzuki violin program in East Harlem provides part of the answer. Artistic differences with Madonna caused Mr. Craven to substitute Meryl Streep in the leading role. Yet the very fact that two such different superstars should leap to play an inspirational violin teacher might tell us that there is more to the current American classical-music scene than empty seats and graying audiences.

The long march to a Miramax film by way of Germany, Japan and East Harlem might tell us something, too. In 1921, Shinichi Suzuki went to Berlin to study the violin. In 1929, he returned home with a German wife, Schiller's conviction that great art makes good people, and a hunch, worked out over the next few decades, that children could learn an instrument the same way they learned a language.

But it was in America where his method took off, after a contingent of tiny Japanese fiddlers dazzled the 1964 meeting of the American String Teachers Association. By latest count, there are some 1,500 registered Suzuki teachers in Japan, 5,600 in the United States.

Among them is Ms. Guaspari, whose program acquired such resonance that the New York music establishment famously stepped in to save it when the Board of Education cut financing in 1991. Fed from the uniquely American salad bar of private contributions, patron-friendly tax laws, media attention and civic respect for achievers, her nonprofit Opus 118 Music Center has since become something of a Field of Dreams for inner-city children with quarter-size Chinese violins.

If the lesson is, "Build it and they will come," the University of Cincinnati's new conservatory complex is as instructive as East Harlem and in many ways more representative. A major river's length from the cultural citadels of the east coast, Cincinnati is American Generic, with an impressive waterfront, a lovingly preserved art deco hotel, a bank mysteriously known as Fifth Third, and the large civic presence of Procter & Gamble. It also boasts a May Festival, clearly descended Schumann's Dusseldorf prototype; a 3,400-seat concert hall in a part of town still known as "Over the Rhine"; and a long history of local support to cover the resulting deficits.

By the 1960's, the old infrastructure, including two 19th-century conservatories and a city university, was nonetheless badly frayed. The solution turned out to be a cocktail of personal initiative and American-style public spending that Schiller himself might have proposed had he been a management professor at the University of Cincinnati rather than a sometime history professor at the University of Jena.

First, the conservatories merged. Second, they were absorbed as the College Conservatory of Music of the University of Cincinnati. Third, the university was absorbed in the Ohio public system. By the early 1990's, 1,000 students were pushing hard on the conservatory's resources, and administrators were again thinking about the links between the arts and the civic culture.

When the new conservatory opened recently, guests could admire the architect Henry Cobb's elegantly functional ensemble of stages, recital halls, classrooms and storage spaces, neatly designed to bridge a former gothic dormitory and a recycled women's gymnasium. The name of the Corbett Center for the Performing Arts recognizes a major patron. That of the Robert J. Werner Recital Hall honors the entrepreneurial dean who leveraged private patronage into a major commitment by the board of regents and the Ohio legislature.

Many of the guests walked past a plaque in the lobby that most Americans would take for granted. But Schiller would probably have noticed it, and it is hard to imagine that it escaped the attention of one guest in particular, Robert Helmschrott, the director of the Bavarian State Conservatory in Munich. The plaque acknowledges more than 40 corporate and individual contributors, all private except for the National Endowment for the Arts. Private contributions accounted for about 25 percent of the \$90 million project. But above all, they document the easy interaction of the private and public sectors. Combined with a historic capacity for importing and energizing immigrant enterprise, this may be America's biggest comparative advantage in the early 21st century.

The interaction is virtually personified in Kurt Sassmannshaus, the chairman of the conservatory's string department. On arriving in Cincinnati in 1982, Mr. Sassmannshaus began developing and combining a clientele extending from 6-year-olds to concert performers with networks extending from the Ohio Valley to China. What an economist might call Mr. Sassmannshaus's vertically integrated violin multinational is one of the conservatory's comparative advantages. And it leads full circle back to Schiller.

Like many American success stories, this one begins with opportunity knocking. In the 1920's, Dorothy Richard Starling earned a teacher's certificate and diploma from the Cincinnati Conservatory. She also studied for one year with the great Eugene Ysaye and for three more with the legendary Leopold Auer. On her death in 1969, her husband, Frank M. Starling, of Houston, created a foundation in her name, dedicated to violin teaching.

The special relationship with Cincinnati began with a call to Mr. Werner's predecessor as dean, Jack Watson. Since then, the Starling Foundation has also endowed chairs at Indiana University, the Juilliard School, the Curtis Institute and Carnegie-Mellon University. But Cincinnati has always been the bellwether and pacemaker. After consulting the renowned LaSalle Quartet at the university, Mr. Watson offered a new chair to Dorothy DeLay, of Juilliard, a legendary teacher in her own right.

To everyone's delight, Miss DeLay accepted, bringing with her three assets that helped turn a promising start-up into a global player. The first, amplified by scholarship money from Starling, was her own magnetic field, drawing talent from as far away as Korea, China, Japan, Germany, Russia, Romania, Albania and Israel. Today, 60 percent of the Cincinnati conservatory's violin students are international.

The second was her own network of artist managements, concert managements and instrument dealers going back to the 1940's, and extending from Juilliard, still Miss DeLay's institutional home, to the Aspen Music Festival in Colorado and the Beijing Conservatory.

The third asset was Mr. Sassmannshaus. A violin teacher's son from Wurzburg, Germany, and a graduate of the Cologne Conservatory, Mr. Sassmannshaus reassessed his own sense of the instrument after hearing and meeting a few of Miss DeLay's prodigies in the late 1970's. With a grant from the German Academic Exchange Service, he set out for Juilliard. On the eve of his return to Germany for a respectably tenured career as a big-city concertmaster, a job opened at Sarah Lawrence College.

It was already clear to Mr. Sassmannshaus that the typically American conjunction of conservatory and foundation would let him do things that were practically impossible at home. In Germany, as on most of the Continent, foundation aid is underdeveloped. Civil-service status practically forecloses private, even nonprofit, spinoffs. Civil-service law defines permissible working hours. Mr. Sassmannshaus took the American job on the spot. He has never regretted it.

A new job in Cincinnati allowed him to act on a second observation. All the emblematic teachers, he noticed, made their mark with very young players. Aided again by seed money from Starling, he added another working day to his conservatory teaching week and started a Saturday music school for 9- to 16-year-olds.

Their names and faces as diverse as the unit roll call in a World War II movie, some 20 youngsters have turned up weekly since 1987 from as far away as Chattanooga, Tenn., Sioux City, Iowa, and St. Louis. Awaiting them on arrival is a full-service curriculum of theory, ear training, private lessons and quartet playing, as well as the Starling Chamber Orchestra, which appears regularly at the Aspen Festival and has toured Germany, Turkey and China.

At first, Mr. Sassmannshaus himself did the management and paperwork. He then turned again to the parent foundation; created the Starling Project Foundation with a board made up of Starling parents, including an executive of the city's power company; opened a downtown office; and hired a manager to deal with logistics and grant applications. Referred by teachers, chance acquaintances and, in one case, the violinist Isaac Stern, Starling players emerge from an audition process that admits one candidate in 10.

"I THINK of a Saturday without Starling as a wasted day," said Ryan Miller, a high school senior from nearby Middletown, Ohio. Linda Johnson, a Starling mother from Festus, Mo., said that the students regard one another as peers and mentors. Their mothers regard one another as a support group.

Last year, with help from selected conservatory students, Mr. Sassmannshaus took the next step, a pilot program for 6-year-old beginners at Seven Hills, a group of private elementary and prep schools. The program is intended to generate a school chamber orchestra within four years.

If participants in the Starling program opt for careers in music, Mr. Sassmannshaus will be pleased. His job, as he sees it, is to ensure that they learn what they need to know to make it as teachers, orchestra players, chamber musicians and, at least in theory, soloists.

But solo careers are not the object. Nobody thinks less of a law school graduate for not making the Supreme Court. If Starling students prefer to be lawyers, that is O.K. with Mr. Sassmannshaus, too. Then they can come back and join his board, he adds cheerfully.

Among them, the pieces make up an arabesque of synergies and virtuous circles. Parents, patrons, foundations and the conservatory, which subsidizes the Starling program with rent-free rehearsal halls, classrooms and practice space, dance cheek to cheek. Younger students create jobs for older students. Talent attracts more talent. Contacts lead to more contacts.

University fund-raisers travel with Starling CD's. A letter from Ms. Streep accompanies the orchestra's recent videocassette. "Music has the power not only to bring great joy to

children's lives," she writes, "but to encourage in them an awareness that diligent effort brings lasting rewards." In other words, arts education as civic education.

At the dedication, Liu Yang, 23, wowed the opening-night audience with a scorching performance of Sarasate's "Zigeunerweisen" on a Guarneri on loan from Dietmar Machold, whose shops in New York, Bremen, Zurich, Tokyo and Vienna make him perhaps the world's only truly global violin dealer. A Chinese national prize winner, originally dispatched to America to study with Miss DeLay, Mr. Liu now studies with Mr. Sassmannshaus.

Next January, Mr. Liu will perform at a national New Year's concert in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, which will be televised around the nation. Meanwhile, the Starling orchestra has been invited back for another tour of China. While there are no current plans for Germany, Schiller's Weimar should come due around 2005, the 200th anniversary of his death.