

Is Music A Human Right?

Pulling young people from sadness

By Meret Bitticks

I don't know how to build houses. I don't know how to address people's dental woes or immunize them. Frankly, two degrees in music have provided me with very few skills that would seem useful in an earthquake zone. But when I found out that there are summer camps in Haiti that need volunteer music instructors I thought, "Well, I can do that."

In the summer of 2012 I volunteered at two Haitian music camps—one for the Holy Trinity School in Port-au-Prince, and one for the École de Musique Dessaix-Baptiste in Jacmel. It seemed like a good idea when I signed up, but in the weeks leading up to my trip I was filled with reservations.

When told of my plans several friends said, "Haiti? Are they ready for music?" I could only shrug and say that I thought so, since these camps were running. Privately, I wondered myself why people still recovering from a devastating earthquake would want to bother with something as seemingly frivolous as music.

It was not going to be easy. From a physical standpoint, there was the potential to catch various tropical diseases and bacterial or parasitic infections. Issues with extreme heat were very real.

I also worried about the language barrier, and I had no idea what level of playing to expect. Unlike music camps with which I've been associated in the States, those in Haiti have little structure; volunteers there are expected to be self-directed and make their own schedules. Volunteers who don't have enough to do simply aren't looking hard enough. This meant helping in areas that were outside my comfort zone (oboe, for example.)

Despite everything, I went.

I returned from my three-week trip at the end of last



summer, and whenever someone asked about my experience in Haiti, I said the same thing: "It was horrifying and beautiful and frustrating and inspiring."

Horrible and Frustrating

Extreme poverty is horrifying. I can think of no other word to describe the

seas of tent towns, the rubble, the difficult living conditions.

My inability to communicate effectively with my students in Haitian Creole, a sort of Old French mixed with African words, also was a very real problem.

The students' instruments were in terrible shape. Students blamed themselves for problems in their playing that were 100 percent caused by instruments in disrepair. Music schools in Haiti rely on donated instruments, many of which were practically unplayable when they left their respective band programs. Most of the *teachers* play on intermediate-level instruments, if they have access to them, and all must learn to do makeshift repairs to student instruments as they go.

Beautiful

Haiti is a beautiful place, and despite difficult conditions, the beauty one encounters in Haiti goes far beyond the physical beauty of the countryside. The generosity of spirit of a people who have very little with which to be generous can be overwhelming. One of the conductors I worked with is fond of saying, "If a Haitian is holding something in his hands, he will offer you half of it." That is a beautiful thing to experience.

Beautiful Again

I decided to return to the École de Musique Dessaix-Baptiste in summer 2013. (The school is named for ►►

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Dessaix Baptiste, a Haitian flutist, composer, and conductor.) I had a more rewarding teaching experience at the other camp, but I felt the students at Dessaix-Baptiste needed me more.

The mission of Dessaix-Baptiste is to help the at-risk youth of Jacmel—through music. The school provides lessons for the very modest fee of \$5 US per month. It also supports the formation of other music schools in the area, and provides

donated instruments to them—and even donated teachers. (I rode to a new school on a motorcycle to teach 12 beginners.)

Students at Dessaix-Baptiste have an amazing generosity of spirit. They regularly stop what they are doing to help explain something to a struggling peer. I am pretty well convinced that the flute students at that school do more teaching than their regular teacher.

My students back here at home were very interested to hear about my first trip. Once I decided to go back, I implemented a month-long “Practice-a-Thon” in which students collected sponsors for days practiced. I recognized students who managed to practice every day for the month, and I rewarded the student who earned the most. Collectively my studio raised more than \$2,500 to buy refurbished flutes. One student raised over \$300 just from the ensembles in her middle school. Graduating seniors and friends donated their back-up flutes, including what may be one of the nicest instruments on the whole island. My friends at Fluteworks Seattle provided eleven beautifully refurbished student flutes, and I even had money to spare!



We also donated an alto saxophone, a trombone, and a suitcase full of sheet music, method books, and French children’s magazines. Perhaps the most significant donation, however, was made by one of my graduating seniors, Lora Kelley. Lora joined me as my helper for the trip. Not only did she take some of the pressure off of me in big group situations, as a close peer of our Haitian students, she became their role model. The students loved her.

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Listening

Once students have a working instrument, the biggest challenge to teaching and learning in an environment such as Haiti is to find places to work that are quiet



and free from distractions. It is a beautiful and frustrating truth of the culture that anyone and everyone is welcome to join in to any activity. This can mean that students try to participate in exercises that are not appropriate for their level. It can also mean that several groups of students are playing different things in the same space at the same time, especially

because the music school itself has three open floors for teaching and practicing. For these reasons, students tend to shut their ears when they play. I feel that by facilitating listening experiences (listening to me, listening to themselves, listening to the group) I am planting seeds for further self-development throughout the rest of the year. If you don’t listen to yourself play, how will you be able to determine what you want to change in your playing? How will you progress?

The new flutes highlighted some major issues with individual playing, especially intonation, which became my new struggle. The focus of all lessons and sectionals became air (amount, speed, support, and direction) and posture as well as listening. The students were mostly able to make changes when asked, but their environment is not conducive to long-term focused practice on these concepts. Because of the open environment, it can be very, very difficult to hear exactly who is playing out of tune and in which direction, much less to hear yourself. Furthermore, the lack of space makes it difficult to change posture problems because students simply have no room in ensembles to hold their instruments correctly. They must be constantly reminded to keep their flutes up, because their intonation will only be as consistent as their posture. My student, Lora, found this to be the most frustrating part of her experience.

If students only hear one another, what do they have to aspire to? Encouraging students to develop a beautiful tone is the cornerstone of my philosophy. Every Haitian student with a now-working instrument was absolutely capable of producing a rich and pleasing flute tone. Lora and I were models for both posture and tone, which was an important part of what we offered students. I believe that students who have a clear idea of how they want to sound will be more likely to find that sound themselves. Next year I plan to come down with some mix-CDs of great flutists, but unfortunately there is a good chance that many of the students won't have access to a CD player. As an alternative, I am working to provide the school with a YouTube listening list to promote the idea of modeling a beautiful

sound throughout the rest of the year.

As of this writing, I plan to return next year, possibly with a different student helper. Although a once-a-year enforcement is grossly inadequate, eventually we will see a long-term change in the flute playing at that program. I hope that a returning presence over time at the very least shows students that they are cared-for, which is far more important than playing ability. If only one seed gets planted and worked on by one student over the school year, then I have been successful. The music program in Haiti inspires me to be a better teacher and a better person. I try to not take my own advantages, or those of my home students, for granted.

Musicians must constantly justify their place in American society. The same old arguments start to feel really tired, and sometimes I feel myself falling into their trap. What place does music have in a country devastated by political corruption and an earthquake? Some people don't get enough to eat, despite wonderful relief efforts, and some people will not be able to fix their houses. But through music and the other arts they will be able to make their lives a little more beautiful in whatever way is meaningful to them. I now believe the pursuit of beauty is a basic human right.

Yes, working in Haiti can be horrible and frustrating. It also is beautiful and inspiring.

Last year a Holy Trinity student was asked why he played the violin, to which he responded, "It pulls me from sadness." How could I not help?



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