

Food for the Soul

Something's cookin' at the Music Kitchen
homeless shelter outreach project

BY LOUISE LEE

M**MOST OF THE TIME**, telling audience members that you hope to see them again is a tidy and cordial way to wrap up a performance. But one venue where that line doesn't work is a homeless shelter, as violinist Kelly Hall-Tompkins realized at a past performance for clients at the men's shelter at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Manhattan. "One man said, 'No, no! We love your music, but we don't want to be here,'" says Hall-Tompkins, founder of Music Kitchen, which organizes and presents solo and chamber concerts at the shelter. "You always want to build a relationship with members of an audience, but in this case, you want them to move on."

The incident, which makes Hall-Tompkins chuckle now, highlights the wrinkles and twists of outreach in venues beyond the more-usual schools, churches, and retirement communities. But connecting to homeless individuals, whom Hall-Tompkins calls "not just musically underserved, but nonserved," has been worthwhile for Music Kitchen and its audiences. Since Hall-Tompkins started the organization in 2005, it has presented 30 concerts at Trinity's men's shelter and the Antonio G. Olivieri Drop-in Center for Homeless Women, also in Manhattan.



TAKING A STAND: Kelly Hall-Tompkins (with violin).

"People who are disenfranchised from society still cling to the desire for beauty and a sense of community," says Bishop Robert Rimbo of the Metropolitan New York Synod, who was, until last August, the pastor of Holy Trinity.

For Hall-Tompkins, the effort has brought plenty of other learning. "All my preconceived notions about the homeless have fallen away," she says. Initially, Hall-Tompkins had reservations about the audience's desire to hear a range of solo and chamber repertoire. But, noting that homeless individuals come from a vast array of experiences and backgrounds, she says she has since realized that there's no need to dumb down programs or restrict them to uplifting tunes or other musical bonbons.

At one Music Kitchen concert, her performance of Ysaÿe's stormy Violin Sonata No. 3 went over well, she says. So did her unaccompanied Bach and the slow movement from a Brahms quartet. "These audiences appreciate repertoire that is challenging, that runs the gamut," says Hall-Tompkins.

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And Hall-Tompkins has found that shelter clients also appreciate the experience of listening to a live musical performance as much as any other population. At Music Kitchen performances, Hall-Tompkins distributes blank cards on which audience members can write comments. Among her favorites, she says, are ones that read, "A blissful end to a stressful day" and "Sounds of heaven." She keeps the mood informal and instructs players, largely friends and colleagues from the New York area, to wear anything but formal black (she usually dons a Music Kitchen T-shirt and slacks.) Hall-Tompkins includes casual remarks about the composers and encourages audience members to ask questions and comment.

The idea for Music Kitchen came about by happenstance. In 2004, Hall-Tompkins, a graduate of the

Manhattan and Eastman schools of music and a former student of Glenn Dicterow and Charles Castleman, planned to rehearse in front of friends to prepare for a concert. But because of scheduling conflicts, that plan didn't pan out. Her husband, percussionist Joe Tompkins, suggested she rehearse before clients at the shelter at Holy Trinity, where the couple are members. Hall-Tompkins initially resisted, assuming that the clients wouldn't care for it. But she proceeded, playing Mozart's Concerto No. 4, with no accompaniment, for about 15 men.

"They loved it," she recalls. "And the wheels in my head started turning."

Hall-Tompkins named her organization Music Kitchen, because it resonated with the term *soup kitchen* and suggested the notion of providing "food for the soul," she says. She set about raising funds, hitting up people from family members and in-laws to New Jersey philanthropists Herbert and Evelyn Axelrod, who are among the group's top donors. By the spring of 2005, Hall-Tompkins had lined up the first concert: the slow movement of the Brahms A minor quartet and part of the Mozart F major quartet, performed by Hall-Tompkins and her colleagues. The concert, Hall-Tompkins recalls, was a success despite a surprise turn of events: the musicians arrived to learn that the volunteer cooks who were to prepare the evening's meal failed to show. Knowing that the audience wouldn't want to listen to music on empty stomachs, Hall-Tompkins and her fellow players improvised a pasta dinner and served it before settling in to play.

About half of the musicians who have performed with Music Kitchen are string performers. "When we go there and play from our hearts, there's a therapeutic back-and-forth for both the listener and performer," says violist Brett Deubner, who has performed with Music Kitchen twice. "Both are being fed."

Hall-Tompkins says her next major goal is to boost fundraising. Her budget of \$22,000 per year lets her present 18 concerts, paying musicians an honorarium of \$100 for about 90 minutes of work, but she'd like to at least double that amount. More money would let her expand the sizes of ensembles and allow players to perform more complicated repertoire that requires heavy rehearsal time. One piece she says she's love to perform is Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat*.

"I don't claim to be an expert about homelessness," Hall-Tompkins says. "I simply love the power of music and sharing it." □

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