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How One Composer Is Using Broken Instruments to Make Underfunded Music Programs Heard



David Lang's symphony incorporates some 1,000 of the Philadelphia public school system's instruments, all in need of repair, to call attention to programs in need of funding.

By Rebecca Milzoff on September 19, 2017

What's the sound of a broken trombone?

For composer David Lang, that's not a Zen koan but a very real question, one with a surprising answer. It all began last year, when Robert Blackson, director of Temple Contemporary in Philadelphia, asked Lang to compose a symphony utilizing some 1,000 of the city public school system's instruments, all in dire need of repair, to draw attention to underfunded music programs. "I immediately got excited," Lang says. "You have to investigate each to figure out what they can do."

He enlisted Found Sound Nation, "the social action wing" of the Bang on a Can contemporary music collective he co-founded, to sort the instruments based on level of damage and to catalog their unique sounds. Lang insisted on using only those that were notably altered. "The Found Sound Nation people would see a violin with one string, no fingerboard, and the sound pin missing, and they'd go, 'I can play music on that. It's just not a Western violin anymore.'"

A staunch supporter of public school music programs—and himself a product of them—Lang says *Symphony for a Broken Orchestra* is the kind of project he's seeking at this point in his career, which has included a Pulitzer Prize and an Oscar nomination (best original song for 2015's *Youth*). "That's one of the thrills for me: stretching myself in as many different directions as I can."

Symphony for a Broken Orchestra will be performed by a diverse ensemble, including members of the Philadelphia Orchestra, amateurs, and kids on December 3 at the 23rd Street Armory. It's as much a social experiment as an artistic one. After the piece is performed, all the instruments will be fixed and returned to the school system, and donors can "adopt" an instrument to pay for its repairs. "It was really important to me that these instruments have their wounds healed," Lang says, "that they are returned to the kids who need them." symphonyforabrokenorchestra.org

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