

Living

# 'This is what broken sounds like': 800 Philly school instruments awaiting repair to be used for symphony

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Connor Przybyszewski, 28, a Drexel grad and a professional musician living in West Philly, tries out a trombone in Temple Contemporary, at Tyler School of Art as part of the Symphony for a Broken Orchestra exhibit.



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As a small corps of musicians arrived on a recent morning, Jeremy Thal gathered them into a loose huddle and laid out the day's mission.

"We know what one broken tuba sounds like," he said. "Now, we're kind of curious what four broken tubas sound like. So, everyone grab a horn that has a leak -- a sizable leak like this one, that's missing a valve."

A half-hour later, a quartet was assembled: a French horn, approximately one-and-a-half trombones, and a French horn-meets-trumpet Frankenstein they were calling a French hornet. "We'll do two normal notes, and two notes of weirds," Thal suggested. Then they played -- a sound that was a little bit Billie Holiday, a little bit pack of feral cats.

This sonic strangeness is the result of a ragtag harvest from classrooms and storage spaces across the School District of Philadelphia, where a backlog of broken instruments has piled up since funding was slashed in 2013. Today, there are more than 800 of them out of a total instrument inventory of 10,000.

They've all been assembled at Temple Contemporary, the art gallery at Tyler School of Art, for use in a new work, Symphony for a Broken Orchestra, to be written by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer David Lang this summer and then performed for the first (and final) time in October. After that, instruments that are not beyond repair will be fixed and returned to schools.

Until Feb. 8, the musical misfits -- cellos with necks snapped off (they're now good only for percussion), trumpets with stuck valves, autoharps so out of tune they'd make Beethoven sound like John Cage -- will be on display at Temple Contemporary.

"Sadly, it's obvious some of these instruments have been in storage for a long time. Some of them are antiques," gallery director Robert Blackson said. "They also reflect

the history of the school district's commitment to music."

Blackson conceived of the project after a conversation with a music teacher friend.

"I said, 'Wouldn't it be great if there was a way we could actually make something from what at the moment is a problem?' " he said.

He contacted Lang, who has undertaken daunting projects, like a chorale piece for 1,000 voices.

Lang's reaction to this strange proposition? "I just exploded with happiness. I immediately imagined how incredible it would be to put all these instruments together to make a spectacular piece of music."

He, after all, first engaged with music as a public school student. And he loved the idea of working with instruments that had been "wounded in action" -- and then healing the wounds.

"The piece of music I'm writing is not the end point," he said, "but an intermediate point before the healing of these instruments and their return to their communities."

And plenty of healing is needed, said Frank Machos, executive director of the district's Office of the Arts and Academic Enrichment. (Until this year, he was director of music education; since his promotion, he's been doing both jobs.)

Machos said most Philadelphia music students relied on the district for instruments. But maintaining them fell by the wayside when budgets were slashed. He's been trying to catch up since.

Teachers have purchased repair kits and learned the basics. But most wind and brass repairs have to be outsourced, at about \$100 apiece. Machos hopes to expand the district's music program, but that would require having more instruments in service.

He hopes the project -- which includes an adopt-an-instrument campaign -- will aid that cause.

“It’s a way to be able to very publicly broadcast our need and request support,” he said, “while also honoring the instruments and the history and legacy of instrumental music in the school district.”

So, in the fall, he and district teachers gathered up their worst casualties and delivered them to Temple.

“Teachers arrived with clarinets and trumpets and tubas spilling out of their personal vehicles,” said Anna Drozdowski, who as project manager developed a system of cataloging the instruments.

Teachers unpacked the instruments gently, almost lovingly, Blackson said. Then, Found Sound Nation, the nonprofit arm of Lang’s new music organization, [Bang on a Can](#), led the process of recording each instrument's unique tones and creating a sound library for Lang to draw on. They had help from Temple music students, professional musicians from local jazz and klezmer ensembles, and many others.

Lang -- who will speak about his approach at 6 p.m. [Feb. 6](#) at Temple Contemporary -- will begin his work once that sound library is complete.

For now, though, folding tables are filled with rows of saxophones, piles of flutes, and heaps of clarinets.

Drozdowski pointed to a row of instruments on the floor. “This pile over here, they’re calling them the unicorns, because they all make sounds that are really spectacular that you couldn’t possibly predict.”

Thal, who works with Found Sound Nation, said each musician has favorites.

“Some are my favorites because they’re actually beautiful horns, and some are my favorite because they have horrendous wounds. Like this trumpet is a 1920s King

and it's actually a beautiful horn," he said, playing a few notes. When he found it, the valves had been inserted in the wrong order -- the easiest kind of repair.

Other instruments, he said, weren't broken at all; they just needed cleaning and routine maintenance.

Zachary McKenna, a freelance audio designer and engineer, likened the process of cataloging the instruments to battlefield triage. He was updating a spreadsheet with each instrument's vital stats for Lang's sound library and for the adopt-an-instrument website.

In the hands of these musicians, he said, even seemingly hopeless instruments can produce beautiful -- or, at least, striking -- sounds.

"It's interesting to see what broken sounds like," he said. "Like, we had these three trombones and it was the most horrifying sound. It doesn't exist in nature, except for from three broken trombones. We're getting to hear things we've never heard -- and hopefully will never hear again."

This year, a 400-member orchestra will demonstrate what an entire city's worth of broken instruments sounds like. Blackson envisions a diverse orchestra -- made up of high school and college students, professional musicians, Mummer, Philadelphia Orchestra members, and schoolteachers -- to teach Philadelphia students that there are many avenues to cultivating a lifelong relationship with music.

But the symphony itself? "It's a once-in-a-lifetime kind of deal," Blackson said. "These instruments will get fixed. So there's a bit of a loss in this, actually, because the sounds they can make today they won't make anymore."