



Photograph by Karl Seifert, courtesy of "Symphony for a Broken Orchestra."

Music Written for the Broken Instruments That Public Schools Couldn't Afford to Fix

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With "Symphony for a Broken Orchestra," David Lang and Temple Contemporary are bringing new hope to arts education in Philadelphia.

Philadelphia's 23rd Street Armory is an awe-inspiring venue: vaulted four-story-high wooden ceilings and exposed brick walls, generous arched windows, polished-concrete floors, all housed within a medieval fortress-style granite structure in the heart of the city. It's the kind of place you can easily imagine strung with bistro lights for an industrial-chic wedding. This past weekend, however, the Armory was transformed into an unconventional concert hall for the singularly unique, transient musical experience that was "Symphony for a Broken

Orchestra”—a piece imagined by Robert Blackson, director of Temple Contemporary at Temple University’s Tyler School of Art, and written by Grammy- and Pulitzer Prize-winning composer David Lang. The Symphony was composed specifically for 400 of the broken instruments owned by the School District of Philadelphia—instruments which the district previously could not afford to repair due to drastic budget cuts in arts education.

Blackson created the project as “a poetic and practical way for us to understand the devastating lack of support there is for the arts in our public schools.” He gained access to every broken instrument—which amounted to over 1,000—in the Philadelphia public school system, promising school music teachers that all fixable instruments would be professionally repaired and returned to them for the following school year.

In order to raise the funds necessary to follow through on that promise, Temple Contemporary launched an online effort inviting people to “adopt” a broken instrument. Visitors to their website could browse images of each damaged instrument, listen to recordings of the (often quite heartbreaking) sounds those instruments produced, and make tax-deductible contributions ranging from \$50 to \$200 towards the rehabilitation of an instrument of their choosing. Donors’ names were printed on tags for the adopted instruments’ cases, commemorating their support for music education. Thus far, over \$200,000 has been raised through instrument adoption. On the Monday following the performance, the instruments played in the symphony were delivered to Philadelphia repair shops, where they will be fixed and returned for the 2018-2019 school year.



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When Blackson invited the world-renowned David Lang to compose a piece for several hundred of these broken instruments, Lang jumped at the chance. "I am only a musician because there were robust music programs in the public schools that I attended as a child," Lang said in an interview with GARAGE after the show. "My first thought was that



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1,000 broken musical instruments meant 1,000 missed opportunities to change schoolchildren’s lives.”

This past weekend, after just one month of rehearsals, Lang’s ephemeral symphony was performed in front of an audience for the first and last time ever by 400 Philadelphia musicians—who ranged in expertise level from young schoolchildren “just learning how to hold their

instruments” to seasoned professionals. The instruments, too, were in various conditions—some only slightly changed from their original state; some considerably more complicated to play; some, in Blackson’s words, “little more than kindling,” quite plainly incapable of doing what they were designed for. “Some of the cellos don’t have a neck, or don’t have strings, and the players are holding them sort of like giant tortoises,” Lang related, “But it’s still an instrument. You can still do something with it.” Part of each musician’s challenge in the rehearsal process, noted Lang, was learning what each instrument could and could not do—exploring its distinctions and possibilities, and then adapting him or herself to it.

As the sun began to sink outside the domed windows of the Armory, the musicians emerged, solemnly, from an archway. Bathed in the bluish glow of the stage lights, cradling fractured violas and rusted French horns and split drums held together with electrical tape, they marched to their respective sections and found their seats. They were young and old, female and male, every color. “You have an accomplished musician playing next to a twelve-year-old, both trying to play broken violins,” Blackson explained to GARAGE, regarding the arrangement of the small “sections” of musicians that flanked the outer edges of the room. “So there’s that commonality there that wouldn’t be there otherwise. It was important in the mixing of the sections that we had those different levels.”

Audience members were seated in a circular arrangement in the center of the vast room, facing outwards—the front row a mere ten feet from the musicians. Such a setup created a distinct intimacy between the audience and the orchestra—a closeness ordinarily not present in a traditional symphony setting. Up this close, audience members were

made acutely aware of the details of the instruments in their various states of disrepair—as well as the emotions experienced by the musicians themselves, which, judging by their facial expressions, ranged from subtle frustration to unbridled joy.

As the first movement began, the sea of broken instruments rattled and rasped with the persistent resonance of rain falling on a tin roof, or a china closet being hurriedly rearranged. This percussion crescendoed, slowly, into a steady, discordant rumble—like an object falling down a set of wooden stairs—which cut off abruptly. After several beats of silence, the second movement began with a playful “conversation” between instruments in which one musician from each section stood, facing the others in that section, and played a short, off-kilter yet strangely beautiful melody which was “answered” by the others in that section. In the third and final movement, the music surged and swelled into an ecstatic, triumphant sort of grace.

A little boy thumped gleefully with both small hands on the wood of his stringless, neckless cello. The severed fibers of a young woman’s violin bow shimmered in the blue light. An elderly man tapped on one half of his broken oboe with the other half. These were still instruments. And their particular sounds—the breathy purr of a clarinet with no mouthpiece, the mournful wail of a trumpet missing valves—would never be heard again after this moment.