

For the Homeless, Music That Fills a Void



Richard Termine for The New York Times

Kelly Hall-Tompkins and Mark O'Connor playing in a shelter in the Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Manhattan.

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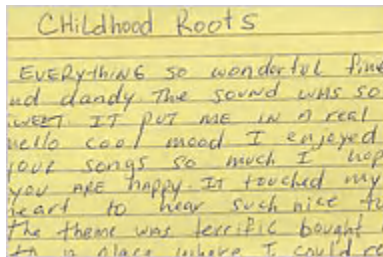
Just three blocks from [Lincoln Center](#), they arrived at the concert on Thursday night by shelter bus, not taxi or limousine. They took their seats around scarred, round folding tables. The menu was chicken curry and rice served on paper plates.

Multimedia



Audio Slide Show

Music for the Soul



Graphic

Notes From the Music Kitchen

These concertgoers were eight tired, homeless men who had been taken to the Holy Trinity Lutheran Church shelter for the night. They listened to the latest performance by Kelly Hall-Tompkins, a professional violinist who has been playing in shelters for five years under the banner of Music Kitchen.

Ms. Hall-Tompkins is not the only do-gooder in the classical music world. Orchestras nationwide took part in a food drive this fall, and Classical Action raises money for AIDS programs through concerts and other activities. Hospital Audiences brings musicians and other performers into wards. But most classical music institutions — orchestras, opera houses and conservatories — pour their philanthropic efforts into large-scale music education for children, supported by hefty fund-raising and marketing machines. They organize youth orchestras; play concerts in poor, urban schools; and provide lessons.

Music Kitchen has a catchy motto (“Food for the Soul”), T-shirts with a logo and a pool of donors. But the operation is essentially Ms. Hall-Tompkins, 38, an ambitious New York freelancer who plays in the [New Jersey Symphony](#) and has a midlevel solo and chamber music career.

“I like sharing music with people, and they have zero access to it,” Ms. Hall-Tompkins said of her homeless audiences. “It’s very moving to me that I

can find people in a place perhaps when they have a greater need for, and a heightened sensitivity to, beauty.”

She invites musician friends to play and uses her networking skills to cajole prominent soloists into joining. They include [Emanuel Ax](#), the pianist, and Albrecht Mayer, a principal oboist of the Berlin Philharmonic. Ms. Hall-Tompkins asked Mr. Ax to take part when he was playing a concerto with the New Jersey Symphony, and she encountered Mr. Mayer in a Tokyo hotel hallway while both were on tour.

The concerts have an air of authenticity and directness that sometimes does not exist in concert halls. Not all the listeners are new to classical music. One woman at a concert said the experience had been bittersweet because it brought back memories of working at the [Boston Symphony Orchestra](#) and “how much my life has changed since.”

For the performers, it can also be bittersweet. “When I have people to play for, it means they are having really hard times,” Ms. Hall-Tompkins said. But the benefit is mutual. “The artists, I find, are just as moved as the people we’re supposedly trying to help.”

Music Kitchen concerts mainly take place at the Antonio G. Olivieri Drop in Center for Homeless Women and at Holy Trinity. Ms. Hall-Tompkins’s first concert was in 2004, when her husband, Joe Tompkins, a percussionist who volunteered as a cook at Holy Trinity, suggested she play for the men there.

Ms. Hall-Tompkins creates programs of beloved pieces that most string players know well, like the [Schubert](#) String Quintet, and she uses the concerts as dress rehearsals for works scheduled for more public performances. All the artists are paid—a token \$100—because Ms. Hall-Tompkins said that she believed in the principle that musicians should be compensated.

On Thursday Ms. Hall-Tompkins had managed to snare a prominent player, Mark O’Connor, the fiddler and composer, who came with manager, personal assistant and public relations man in tow. She and Mr. O’Connor

— who has played at shelters around the country — are planning to play together, including a Sept. 11 performance with the Evansville Philharmonic, in Evansville, Ind.

Shortly before 8 p.m., the men quietly filtered into the basement of the church, at 65th Street and Central Park West, and picked out their bedding. They wheeled folding beds over to a wall and opened them. They took their seats around the tables under neon lights.

Ms. Hall-Tompkins introduced herself and Mr. O'Connor. "You have here one of the great violinists of our generation," she said. "This is a guy who fills concert halls all over the place."

They plunged into a duet by Mr. O'Connor, "Appalachia Waltz." As the two violins wove nostalgic, homespun lines, the men watched intently, not touching their food. Mr. O'Connor went off to the side and sat on a platform, while Ms. Hall-Tompkins talked about the next work, Bach's Partita No. 2 for unaccompanied violin.

"It's based on a set of dance movements," she said. "Of course, it's not the dances we would do today." Bach looked down on the proceedings from a framed poster behind her. One man in a blue hooded sweatshirt moved his head back and forth to the music.

Mr. O'Connor took over with a medley of traditional American tunes, like "Boil the Cabbage Down" and "Arkansas Traveler," a journey through blue grass, jazz and blues country.

"You guys are fantastic," one of the men interjected.

They joined again for the first movement of Mr. O'Connor's Double Violin Concerto, a jazzy, glissando-filled dialogue, in which Ms. Hall-Tompkins played the straight man to Mr. O'Connor's wilder lines.

The audience members applauded politely between each number and finished their food. Afterward, Ms. Hall-Tompkins opened a discussion.

“How in the world did you end up playing the violin?” asked a man in a black watch cap.

Ms. Hall-Tompkins said she was influenced by a visit to her local orchestra as a child in Greenville, S.C.; by the music of Bach in her Lutheran church; and by [Warner Brothers](#) cartoons. “We’re talking Bugs Bunny, Elmer Fudd,” she said, and played snatches of Bugs’s favorites: the overture from the “Barber of Seville” and the Wagner theme set to the text “Kill the wabbit.” Several of the men laughed in recognition.

One asked about the musicians’ feelings about pop music. “I’m a rock girl,” Ms. Hall-Tompkins said. Another asked what was Bach’s “most famous piece.” Ms. Hall-Tompkins played some well-known excerpts.

The shelter coordinator, Omowale Adewale, said he rarely saw the men so lively. Often they collapse with exhaustion after eating. Some even skip the meal.

Mr. O’Connor said he was struck by how the men opened up after hearing the two violins in dialogue. “Maybe through this music there’s healing,” he said.

One man, who identified himself by his nickname, Cleveland, said music helped him relax. He had a tattoo of a G clef and several notes on his neck. “I look at music as something to get my mind focused off of the other things I’m going through,” he said.

Joseph Rucco said the music evoked childhood memories. “Classic music will never die,” he said. “I’m not stable right now. To hear them play, it motivates me to do what I have to do in the future.”

Ms. Hall-Tompkins scrupulously memorializes each concert. She writes a description of the event, takes photographs and has the shelter residents write down their thoughts on index cards.

“I get a crazy kind of pleasure documenting the whole thing,” she said.

[In one card](#) from Thursday night, a man who gave only his first name, Daryl, wrote: “It touched my heart to hear such nice tunes,” adding, “I will keep you in my prayers. You made an impact on me greatly.”

After the musicians left, the men went to sleep. The bus would be back at 6 a.m.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: December 28, 2009

An article on Dec. 19 about Music Kitchen, a program of concerts run by the violinist Kelly Hall-Tompkins at homeless shelters, misstated the name of the orchestra that employs a musician who has performed with her. The musician, Albrecht Mayer, is a principal oboist of the Berlin Philharmonic, not the Berlin Symphony Orchestra.