Enriching the Gila Valley with Chamber Music

by Eva Lundell, The Savane Trio

Safford, Arizona in the Gila Valley is not what we envisioned a rural residency site to be like. Long before we arrived in August of 1998, Safford boasted an active arts community and a well-established music program in the schools. This pre-existing musical structure made it easy for us to fit in and, hopefully, to enhance the area’s cultural life.

The Gila Valley Arts Council (GVAC) programs a full season every year, inviting seven or eight performing groups that range from Latin American folk musicians to the National Symphony Orchestra. They also host a large annual cowboy poet festival. Visiting artists do residencies in schools as part of their contract. As a result, the local students have diverse, regular exposure to the arts. We have been incorporated into the GVAC concert series as the first and last events of their current season, and by giving outreach concerts in the area. One of our most memorable outreach experiences was playing at the federal penitentiary in Safford. Although the idea was daunting at first, the warmth, interest, and respect with which we were received made it one of our most rewarding performances.

Eastern Arizona College in neighboring Thatcher, AZ has excellent facilities where we rehearse and perform. As part-time faculty at EAC, Jacqueline and I play in the orchestra and lead string sectional rehearsals. All members of the Trio give private lessons to music majors and conduct a weekly combined studio class.

Our pianist, Keiko Asakawa attends monthly meetings and gives workshops on piano pedagogy for the Eastern Arizona Music Teachers Association in Safford. Many piano students at the college studied previously with teachers in the association, and now the group’s president studies with Keiko! The five-year-old string program in Safford’s elementary and middle schools has grown each year. The students love to see us turn into “rag dolls” with slouching posture and ridiculous bow holds, and under their tutelage, be reconstructed into string players with proper positioning.

We have worked to enrich what was already in place here, but we have also been able to start new projects and take chamber music to places it’s never been. One of our most enjoyable duties is entitled curriculum enhancement. The original goal of the program was to use chamber music to deepen the student’s understanding of other subjects, such as history or literature. Sometimes we are able to follow their curriculum, as we did when the senior English class read *Harrison Bergeron* by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. The story takes place in a futuristic world where all citizens are made equal by taking away any positive characteristics such as beauty or intelligence. We were able to talk about equality, using musical examples, within our own little trio community, and to demonstrate how the diversity of our instruments makes a more interesting and beautiful whole. For younger students we applied this same theme to math, using simple equations to show how composers use different combinations and roles of instruments in their works.

Despite Safford’s defiance of our expectations, it really is rural here, and it really is the desert. Through our kitchen window we like to watch the cattle, egrets, kestrels, and lizards. Even a curious roadrunner invited himself for a look around the inside of our house! We tried to lecture him on Baroque performance practices, but not all audiences are so receptive and supportive as the people of Safford, Arizona.

*The Savane Trio (Eva Lundell, violin; Jacqueline Woolley, cello; Keiko Asakawa, piano) has been part of the Rural Residency Program in Safford, AZ during the 1998-99 season.*

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