

Immigrant Musicians Form People's Orchestra

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More than a year ago, Joseph Milo met his building's doorman who surprisingly told him that he was once the principal cellist at the Moscow Symphony. A few days later, he met a displaced violinist who was working as a pizza deliveryman. As an immigrant musician himself from Israel, he immediately had an inspiration – to form an orchestra of similarly talented musicians who have nowhere to practice their skills

"Some of the [immigrant] musicians are very well-trained and talented, but are unable to practice their profession here in Montreal," said Milo, an accomplished local musical director and teacher for over 20 years, in a recent interview. "It's mainly due to the unavailability of positions and the fact that they are also busy trying to integrate into Quebec society and making a living."

Last winter, Milo started to place ads in local ethno-cultural papers and put up posters in music departments to recruit musicians for his Musicians of the World Symphony Orchestra.

However, he found that it was much harder to recruit top-notch immigrant performers than he thought. After considerable work to bring less-talented performers up to scratch, Milo managed

to get more than 50 musicians from almost 20 countries. They come largely from Russia and eastern Europe as well as southern Europe, Armenia, Kazakhstan, the Middle East, and Venezuela.

At rehearsals, it was often harder to get the several local musicians who joined to come regularly. Immigrant musicians "are more motivated because their hearts are in the music. They were looking for it." Many waited a few years – an eternity for musicians – to practice and then to perform.

By last May, they were ready to play in Saint-Laurent with Vanier College's choir where the packed auditorium gave the nascent orchestra an enthusiastic response. A few weeks later, the Musicians of the World gave its official inaugural concert at Concordia University's Oscar Peterson Hall.

While works by classical composers such as Mozart, Beethoven and Ravel were highlighted, a piece by renowned Quebec composer Jacques Hétu and classical Chinese music by a trio calling themselves The Oriental Strings were also featured.

"I would like to continue featuring a musician or a group of musicians from a cultural community represented in the orchestra."

The demand was so great that 50 extra chairs had to be found and another 100 people had to be turned away. Milo had to come in a few times from backstage to take bows to receive a few standing ovations.

Afterwards, some long-time concert-goers told him that it was quite unusual to see the musicians actually smiling after a tiring two-hour program. "The excitement was still there."

Since its inaugural concert, it has a few more times, including a July 1st Canada Day celebration in Cote St. Luc which has already supported the new orchestra with funding and rehearsal space. Through government funding and corporate sponsors, Milo expressed hope the orchestra can grow in the number of musicians, of countries represented, and of Montreal boroughs where it can play. The eventual goal is to help keep costs low so that more people can go to classical concerts as well as to help the musicians give up their day jobs. "The mission is to make sure that they don't stay taxi drivers and pizza deliverymen. We want them to practice their profession as professionals."



At its inaugural concert last June, Musicians of the World director Joseph Milo greets renowned Quebec composer Jacques Huet. Composed of immigrant musicians, the orchestra played some of his works as well as those by Mozart, Beethoven, and Ravel.

(Photo: Courtesy)