

MWSO hits the right note



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When Joseph Milo, a CSL resident and accomplished conductor, composer and pianist, struck up a casual conversation with his doorman, he was surprised to find out that the man was once an accomplished cellist in a major Russian symphony orchestra. It was the beginning of what would soon become the Musicians of the World Symphony Orchestra. When he later met a pizza deliveryman who had been a violinist in a Romanian orchestra, he just knew he had to do something.

Imagine studying and training for years and years to perfect your skills as a musician, only to immigrate to another country and have to resort to menial "survival" jobs to make ends meet. This is nothing new, and Lord knows, we've all met cabbies and depanneur owners who are so overqualified and so overskilled to be behind the wheel of a car or standing behind a cash register that it makes me embarrassed for my country and its inability to properly and fairly utilize these bright, hard-working, highly skilled workers.

If there's one thing I respond to the most, it's passion. When I meet people who are immersed in a challenge, battling against a myriad of obstacles to make things better, I react quickly, and it's usually in the form of "how can I help?"

When Lucy Ravinsky, shared the story of MWSO with me, which she co-founded with husband Joseph Milo, I was stunned that they haven't received more government support and are struggling to find the funds to continue operating. I can think of no better tangible example of how integration ideally should work and how to best put skilled immigrants (in this case musicians) to work in their respective field.

"Faced with a looming labour shortage as the birthrate falls, Canada scours the world for skilled workers every year – we woo them, test them, charge them a lot of money and then choose the best of the crop. So why, after these professionals and tradespeople get here, do we roll out the red tape and not the red carpet?" (Globe and Mail, January 8, 2003). Why, indeed!

MWSO is the first orchestra of its kind in Canada and offers employment to over 55 musicians from 16 countries. All of a sudden, classically trained musicians from China, Armenia, Russia, Korea and the Middle East, had the opportunity to tap into their potential and share the gift of music with an audience; to reclaim a dream that many of them had probably thought was long lost.

"Music is my refuge" Maya Angelou once said. But to a classically trained musician who dreams of performing, music is their salvation, their calling, their reason for living.

Imagine not being able to share that gift because circumstances have forced you to immigrate to another country which just doesn't seem to be able to figure out how to have the know-how and/or the willingness to best integrate you as an accepted and useful member of its society.

Three years later and over 20 phenomenal and critically acclaimed performances they're still scrambling to find a way to keep the orchestra alive. It's amazing that such a success story, such a celebration of Montreal's multiculturalism has not been met with more support on all levels. But there's still hope. Contact lucyr@sympatico.ca if you would like to help. In any capacity.