

String Meets Steel to Build Harmony



KING DAY CELEBRATION The Haven String Quartet, with, from left, Tina Hadari, Yaira Matyakubova, Matthew Beckmann and Colin Benn.

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By PHILLIP LUTZ

IN a fitting tribute to Martin Luther King Jr., the Haven String Quartet will be forging new cultural relationships on Monday by sharing a bill — and, at some points, a stage — with its neighbor on Whalley Avenue in New Haven, St. Luke’s Steel Band.

This first-time meeting of string quartet and steel band could produce some of the most unusual sonic combinations heard on a New Haven stage this season. But that is just one part of the rich cultural mix promised by the concert, a production of Music Haven, a nonprofit organization that offers free instrumental instruction to nearly 60 New Haven schoolchildren, who will also appear in the show.

The concert, which will be held at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, will also offer works of hip-hop-inspired classicism and classically inspired rap. And like most of Music Haven’s activities — classes, workshops and quarterly gatherings of family and friends, in addition to the shows — it will offer something more: a community-building experience meant to heighten the students’ interest in the musical canon.

“We’re always discussing how to make it a more normal feature of their daily lives so that it’s more culturally relevant to them,” said Tina Hadari, 34, a violinist and the executive director of Music Haven.

The central vehicle for achieving Music Haven's goals is the Haven String Quartet, its resident ensemble. The group — Ms. Hadari and Yaira Matyakubova on violins, Colin Benn on viola and Matthew Beckmann on cello — performs, alone or with students, at nearly all of the organization's concerts.

On Monday, the group will perform two pieces on its own: the "Lyric Quartet," a three-part suite in the Debussy mode written in 1960 by the African-American composer William Grant Still, and "Rosa Parks," part of "A Civil Rights Reader," an ongoing project of the Haitian-American violinist and composer Daniel Bernard Roumain. Both performances will be firsts for the quartet.

The decision to focus on Mr. Roumain, 40, who seems as comfortable writing string quartets as he was appearing with Lady Gaga on "American Idol," is an apt one. Told of Music Haven's decision to play "Parks," he expressed appreciation, noting that the piece was his fifth for string quartet, and a sixth had been commissioned by Community Music Works in Providence, R.I. — the organization Ms. Hadari cited as a model for her group.

For a work with credibility in the classical world, "Parks" — especially the second movement, "Klap Ur Handz," which instructs the musicians to clap and stomp in a kind of call-and-response pattern — generates unusual enthusiasm among young urban audiences. When the Haven String Quartet previewed the movement at a recent "performance party," one of the gatherings at which Music Haven students play for family and friends, the crowd spontaneously clapped along.

The steel band's choice of material should also prompt recognition. Though the band's repertory draws on a number of traditions, Deborah Teason, a composer and the band's director, said she had chosen tunes that hew to the theme of the King holiday, like the spiritual "Oh Happy Day," which the band will perform on its own.

Three other songs on tap for the concert — "Amazing Grace," "Lift Every Voice and Sing" and "I Want Jesus to Walk With Me" — should also ring a bell with many of the children. But the tunes' treatment will stray into unfamiliar territory as the string quartet and steel band join forces on them.

Describing the collaborative effort as "an interesting experiment," Ms. Teason, who has written for string quartet and solo steel pan, said she was considering culling a quartet from the steel band — a move that should address what Mr. Beckmann, the cellist, suggested could be an imbalance in volume between the groups that could necessitate amplification of the strings.

That was just one of the matters of musical integration that Ms. Teason and Mr. Benn, the violist, have been discussing in recent weeks. A graduate of the Juilliard School whose Guyanese father familiarized him with steel bands as a child, Mr. Benn said his background had been useful in the talks. He could play a similar role in future collaborations between the groups.

"For me, on a personal level, it's pretty amazing to mix these two worlds of string quartet and my own heritage," he said.

The mixing of string quartet and steel band cultures is not the only collaboration that will take place at the concert. Netta Hadari, a London-born violinist of Israeli heritage who spent much of his adolescence in South Africa, will bring his experience to the table with “Music Haven Rap,” a composition performed before only once, in 2008.

For the piece, Mr. Hadari, Music Haven’s development director and Ms. Hadari’s husband of three years, has created a repeating minor-key figure, played in unison by the string quartet and all of the children, except for three who will perform raps they have written over the figure.

One of those children, Donasia Gray, an ebullient 10-year-old, said she had been honing her rap as the day of the concert approached. She’s a fan of rappers, she said, and Music Haven’s allowing her to be one, if only for a day, is just one of the ways the organization has inspired her to practice her violin regularly.

“They teach us to work our hardest,” she said, “and they’re always pushing us to do our best.”

A Martin Luther King Jr. Day Celebration, with the Haven String Quartet, St. Luke’s Steel Band and students of Music Haven, will take place on Monday at 2 p.m. at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, 111 Whalley Avenue, New Haven. Free.

musichavenct.org; (203) 745-9030.