

World-class pianist Emanuel Ax celebrates community in Providence

Thursday

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Emanuel Ax joins the nonprofit Community MusicWorks on March 23 and 24 to teach master classes and give a community concert ... in a taco restaurant.

By Keith PowersSpecial to The Journal

There was an era when becoming a great musician meant ignoring the public — forgoing the idea of being like the rest of the world, and concentrating on just being an artist.

"None of this happened when I was in school," said pianist Emanuel Ax. "But I think it's the way music should be."

Ax refers to the engagement of Community MusicWorks, which has taught, guided and engaged musicians of all inspirations for 20 years in Providence. Ax joins the nonprofit March 23 and 24 — not to perform on the grand stage, as he has his entire career, but to teach master classes, participate in a musical spaghetti supper, and give a real community concert ... in a taco restaurant — as part of a two-day residency.

It's not a typical itinerary for the world-famous Ax. His biography reads like an aspiring musician's fantasy: Grammy Awards, Avery Fisher Prize, honorary doctorates, and collaborations with the likes of Yo-Yo Ma, Isaac Stern and all the great orchestras.

At 67, Ax continues to perform at the highest level. A recent run with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, with which he has performed dozens of times, offered a luscious account of Mozart's E-flat concerto. And it's not just Boston; a look at Ax's spring itinerary shows concerts in Berlin, Paris, Lucerne, New York, San Francisco and elsewhere.

Performing at La Lupita Tacos Mexicanos in Olneyville Square in Providence is a long way from the gilded stage at Boston's Symphony Hall, but for Ax, "now you can make your life in music without following a predictable path." Which is just what Community MusicWorks founder, artistic director and resident musician Sebastian Ruth has done.

Ruth met Ax at Yale last year, where Ruth is a visiting professor and where Ax came to perform and lecture. "He was totally curious about our work in the community," Ruth said. "He made a point of telling me that the previous generation, his generation, by virtue of the jet-setting they do, had not made any connection to individual communities.

"He said, 'If there is anything I can do,' and I told him that our 20th season was coming up, and I hoped he would just participate. But he said, 'I want to come and be part of it all, work with the students. Not just the advanced kids — I want to see all the kids.' "

So it came to be. The first day of the residency includes master classes at Brown University and open rehearsal with MusicWorks students, a panel discussion on what it means to be a citizen artist, and a performance — with tacos — at La Lupita. On Friday, a dinner in the West End Community Center will be followed by a performance featuring Ax with the MusicWorks Collective and students. All the events are open to the public.

"The concert is part of 'We Shall Overcome,' a longer project that we are doing at CMW that mixes music pedagogy with social justice pedagogy," Ruth said. "At the taqueria, it will be an informal chamber music concert. We've done a series there, trying to bring different audiences to events.

"I'm hoping to get two takeaways from this visit," Ruth said. "For one, that this person who is so famous is coming to my neighborhood, and that my neighborhood is worthy of this. But more importantly, I want our community to be able to say, 'Because I'm studying music, I'm part of the community of musicians.' He's a musical colleague. Sure, he's had a lot more experience, but we're all part of the musical family."

"People like Sebastian are adventurous," Ax said. "It's not the way we were. For my generation, we had blinders on. If you were lucky, you got to play. If not, it was difficult.

"They are showing everyone that it's good to have an instrument in your hands," he said, "whether you're a musician, or you're working for the city, or you're a carpenter. That's why I'm glad to be a part of this."

The Emanuel Ax Festival Residency with Community MusicWorks runs March 23 and 24 at various locations in Providence. The festival includes open rehearsals, master classes and a concert, March 24, in the West End Community Center, 109 Bucklin St., Providence. For a complete listing of events and for tickets call (401) 861-5650 or visit communitymusicworks.org.

— Keith Powers covers music and the arts for the GateHouse papers and WBUR's *The ARTery*. On Twitter at [@PowersKeith](https://twitter.com/PowersKeith).

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