

# With Community Concerts, The Boston Symphony Orchestra Brings Its Music To Us

March 16, 2017 By [Keith Powers](#) 



YMCAs, community centers, elementary schools, social clubs — the Boston Symphony Orchestra Community Chamber players don't just go there to perform, they go there to learn. To learn about the space, about the community and about audiences that would likely never set foot in Symphony Hall, or even consider coming to a classical music performance in the first place.

The concerts began in 1999, so they are hardly a new idea, but the focus for the BSO has changed — less about "bringing the music to the suburbs" and more about learning "who are the people who don't come to Symphony Hall." It's a subtle difference for sure, but reflects the changing attitude that the organization has of the public.

"We used to call them educational programs," says Jessica Schmidt, the BSO's director of education and community outreach. "Now we know better. It's a two-way street, and now we call it engagement."

"Our idea of education is starting to move to another place," she says. "This program is a microcosm of that movement, going to a place that is respectful to our model, but outside of the normal concert experience."

The department's engagement is multifaceted, including these community concerts, free student performances, youth and family programs in Symphony Hall, and in-class activities. The community chamber programs — the next one will be March 19, at Nevins Hall in Framingham — bring BSO players out to non-traditional venues for performances and casual chats with the audience.

Hibernian Hall in Roxbury's Dudley Square regularly hosts the community concerts, as well as plays, dance and historical presentations. "We're a satellite site," says Hibernian's artistic director Dillon Bustin. "We also host for the Celebrity Series, and the American Repertory Theater and the Huntington.

"For the community concerts we get a mixture of people," he says. "Some followers of the BSO, who welcome the chance to see chamber music in an



intimate setting. But the majority of the audience are people from the vicinity, who would never go to Symphony Hall.”

Presentations from the likes of the Boston Symphony are not always what Hibernian audiences have in mind, however. “To bring in classical music in the western tradition — some people don’t want it at all,” Bustin says. “They want contemporary urban music.”

“It’s a generational thing, in part,” he says. “Most of our middle-aged audience is open to anything. And we do try to be all things to all people, which I know is futile. But from my point of view, the community concerts help us broaden the spectrum of what we can offer in the space.”

If the welcome is not completely unanimous, it still benefits the symphony as an organization — and offers differing viewpoints to the musicians themselves.

“We are stronger when we have the perspective of the community with us,” Schmidt says. BSO cellist Adam Esbensen, who has performed on a number of these programs, agrees.

“These concerts are in a lot of different venues,” he says. “The audiences know the space. They go there. It belongs to them. Among other things, they feel more comfortable coming up and saying hello. It’s different than Symphony Hall — they are welcoming you to their spot.”

It offers a chance for BSO members — whose schedule can be chock-a-block with music they need to prepare and perform with the orchestra — to make proposals for repertory they want to explore, and to do so with colleagues they regularly share the larger stage with, but not the smaller stage.

“We make proposals about repertoire, and about the colleagues we want to perform with,” Esbensen says. “We all definitely hope our proposals get accepted. I’ve done at least one a year since it started, always unusual


combinations.”

Violinists Sheila Fiekowsky and Bracha Malkin, violists Daniel Getz and Leah Ferguson and cellist Mickey Katz perform quartets by Loeffler and Beethoven on the March 19 program in Framingham. Succeeding venues include Roxbury's Hibernian Hall on March 26, Motherbrook Community Center in Dedham on April 2, the Colonial Theatre in Pittsfield on April 9 and Rockland High School on April 30.

“Our thinking has gone from ‘How do we get the audiences of the future?’ to ‘How can we use these relationships to learn from the community?’ ” Schmidt says. “We have all these resources in our department, and our hall, and our fantastic musicians. But we also have our audience, an insanely rich adult amateur population, and all these conversations ongoing at the community level.”

*The next [Boston Symphony Orchestra Community Chamber Concert](#) will be Sunday, March 19 at 3 p.m. at Nevins Hall in Framingham.*

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