

BUSINESS DAY | GIVING

One Way to Fix Broken School Instruments: Call a Composer

By TED LOOS NOV. 6, 2017

Parents are used to hearing that school budgets are putting the squeeze on activities like music and sports. But rarely has a solution to such a problem been as elaborate and artistic as the “Symphony for a Broken Orchestra.”

The Pulitzer- and Grammy-winning composer David Lang was commissioned by Temple Contemporary, the art gallery at Temple University, to create the symphony to help solve a problem: The Philadelphia school system has more than 1,000 broken instruments and little money to fix them.

Around 400 musicians, a third of them students in the public schools, will perform the piece on Dec. 3 at the 23rd Street Armory in Philadelphia on some of those broken instruments.

Now based in New York, Mr. Lang grew up in Los Angeles.

“I thought, ‘I am a musician because there were instruments in my school,’” he said. “I had a visceral response to this project. Every one of these broken instruments is a kid who won’t have a life-changing experience. I am getting upset right now just thinking about it.”

After the show, for which tickets are free, the instruments will be repaired, using money from donations inspired by the performance, online gifts to “adopt” instruments and financial support from the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage and the Barra Foundation.

Repair kits will also be given to the schools, and a “legacy fund” endowment established. About \$100,000 has been raised of the \$1 million goal.

The initiative is an example of focused local philanthropy, something that strongly motivates donors, said Buff Kavelman, a New York–based philanthropy consultant.

“There’s a lot of satisfaction in being involved in something that you can have direct knowledge of and see the impact on the community,” Ms. Kavelman said.

The Pew Charitable Trusts, which is based in Philadelphia and funds the Pew center, is a global organization. But Rebecca W. Rimel, the president and chief executive of the trusts, said in an email that Pew remained “committed to the values of our founders and their efforts to serve the community they called home.”

The idea for the symphony came to Rob Blackson, the director of exhibitions at Temple Contemporary, in 2013.

“The district closed 23 schools, and they set out to consolidate and clean everything,” Mr. Blackson recalled of the instruments being evaluated. “So I went with my assistant to this gymnasium that was full of pianos, 40 or so of them.”

Some of them were not in good shape.

“It was heartbreaking,” he said. “The pianos still had things taped to them from music teachers: ‘You were born an original — don’t die a copy.’”

“If there are this many pianos, what else is there?” Mr. Blackson said. “What is a problem, could be a challenge.”

He contacted Frank Machos, the director of music education for the School District of Philadelphia, about the idea.

“We found the macabre in all of this,” Mr. Machos said. “The simple, depressing part is that yes, we have a lot of broken instruments in Philadelphia. It’s symbolic of the ebb and flow of funding.”

But he stressed that the situation was fixable, like the instruments themselves.

“None of them were designed to be anything more than a tool with a short shelf life,” Mr. Machos said. “The chance to bring attention to this and to work on it is exciting.”

And it’s hardly just a local issue.

“This is the kind of problem every school district has,” Mr. Machos said. “It’s a big-city problem.”

Once he had the schools on board, Mr. Blackson had to find someone to create music, and he thought of Mr. Lang.

“I had known David from his work with Bang on a Can,” the music nonprofit, “and he’s the kind of composer who would take on a challenge,” Mr. Blackson said. “I sent him an email, and he responded within five minutes.”

Mr. Lang was busy, but interested.

“He immediately saw something meaningful for him, not only as artistic expression, but also meaningful personally,” Mr. Blackson said.

Mr. Lang has experience with nontraditional compositions and unusual instruments. In August, he presented a single-movement concerto at the Mostly Mozart Festival at Lincoln Center. It featured the four specialists of the music organization So Percussion playing on partly full wine bottles, trash cans and piles of twigs.

The composition process for the symphony was “definitely unusual,” said Mr. Lang, who worked from a sample library of the sounds of the broken instruments.

“Each has a unique character,” he said. “There are two different ways to approach this: Restrain yourself to only what these instruments can do, and the other thing is ask what they should be able to do.”

Mr. Lang combined the approaches. “You will be able to hear how wounded they are, but this is not a dissonant piece,” he said.

Mr. Blackson, who has been at Temple Contemporary for six years, acknowledged that he had given “a real challenge for an artist,” adding, “I have no idea what the notations for this piece are going to look like.”

Mr. Blackson takes to heart the intersection of education and the arts. “Music education is being questioned everywhere,” he said. “There’s a way we can still have it, despite the lingering challenges, if we think about it another way.”

And those ways include sounding an alarm in a creative fashion, as well as public-private partnerships.

“I hope people get from this a sense of possibility,” Mr. Blackson said. “It’s too easy to write something off.”