

# SUN LIFE

## SOOTHING SOUNDS

The quartet is sponsored by The Sony Centre for the Performing Arts, The University of Toronto Faculty of Music and The Toronto Arts Council. Their next performance is Sunday, May 1 in Toronto at The Sony Centre. For tickets: [ceciliastringquartet.com/xenia](http://ceciliastringquartet.com/xenia), e-mail [xeniaconcerts@gmail.com](mailto:xeniaconcerts@gmail.com) or call 416-738 8488.

# On a high NOTE



The famous Cecilia String Quartet makes beautiful music that is accessible and appealing for those with autism spectrum disorders.

JOANNE RICHARD

Special to Postmedia Network

## Special concerts make music accessible to all

Music is magical — and for families with children with autism, a classical performance is music to their ears.

The famous Cecilia String Quartet is making beautiful music that is accessible and appealing for those with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). The amazing power of music comes to life with the quartet's specially created Xenia Concerts, a classical series that helps these children engage and communicate in an interactive, open environment.

Studies show that children, and even adults, with ASD respond well to music — supporting emotional, cognitive and social development, as well as promoting wellness, including reducing anxiety.

Families whose members are autistic know this firsthand. (And for Ontario families dealing with autism, anx-

ety levels shot up recently when the provincial government cut out intensive behavioural intervention, or IBI, therapy for children ages five and up. Many families are appealing this.)

Research shows classical music inspires a connection, drawing out joy and celebration: “There’s a glaring gap in this musically under-served demographic”, says Sarah Nematallah, violinist of the quartet and co-creator of the Xenia series.

Traditional concert settings are not always accessible, and “children with ASD and their families are often excluded from participating in community events and feel isolated,” says Dr. Irene Drmic, director of the Autism Research Unit at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto.

“Live classical concerts should be inclusive events that

enrich the lives of all types of audiences, and that everyone deserves equal access,” adds Drmic, who helped develop the series.

In general, classical music concerts suggest elitism. And a very distinctive audience: One that enjoys the art form in stillness and silence, says Nematallah. “Consequently, people living with autism are often not welcomed to attend because they have tendencies to move around and make sound.

“Despite this unfortunate reality...children on the spectrum show that live classical concerts make powerful impressions on those with autism, and can greatly improve their quality of life.”

They do so by making the experience a gentle affair — there are pillows strewn about, and the musicians anticipate movement and reaction. Even the lighting is adjusted.

““

**They watch by sitting in their seats, lying on the floor ... or dancing.”**

Dr. Irene Drmic on the Xenia Concerts

“They watch by sitting in their seats, lying on the floor, standing afar, or dancing — it was truly accessible to everyone, no matter their needs!” said Drmic.

The quartet is working to bring the Xenia series across Canada. In the meantime, they

continue to tour internationally — they have performed in more than 30 countries on four continents at prestigious concert halls.

“Our concert activities have taken us to places as far away as Japan, Australia, and the United Arab Emirates,” says Nematallah.

They record for Analekta Records, and their latest CD release of works by Felix Mendelssohn was nominated for a Juno Award for Best Classical Album. “We are the James D. Stewart Quartet in Residence at the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Music where we teach chamber music.”

According to Nematallah, “Xenia” is an ancient Greek concept of welcome and generosity shown to travellers from afar — the Xenia Series is all about inclusion.

The series was developed with input from numerous

organizations including Sick Kids Autism Research Unit, Autism Ontario and The Royal Conservatory of Music, and the Toronto and Hamilton District School Boards.

The severity of difficulties with ASD is quite variable, says Drmic. “Autism spectrum disorder is characterized by difficulties with social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as well as restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities...”

“The range of abilities made developing this concert series more complex, so that all people with this diagnosis were considered, respected and included,” she says, adding that sensory sensitivities also need to be considered.

According to Nematallah, the series highlights innovative programming coupled with verbal presentation and visual aids — plus short breaks to allow audience members to stretch and greet one another.