

Cecilia Quartet reaches out to children with autism

Almost half of the Cecilia Quartet's concerts are outreach to music-starved communities including children with autism



The Cecilia String Quartet members, from left, Sarah Nematallah, Rachel Desoer, Min-Jeong Koh and Caitlin Boyle spent a year researching autism in order to fashion a program that would meet their audience's needs.

By **TRISH CRAWFORD** Music

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Jaime Brisebois didn't know what to expect when she took her great nephew, Marcus, to hear the [Cecilia String Quartet](#) perform.

Marcus, 8, has autism and the music-loving Brisebois knows the strict rules around behaviour and quietness in classical concerts would be hard for him to obey.

But the Sunday afternoon concert in the lower level of the [Sony Centre](#) was different: it was designed specifically for children with autism. They could sit on pillows or on the floor; they could dance; they could sit quietly in a corner if things got too noisy.

Marcus loved the show and, at the end, went onstage to meet the cellist and touch her instrument.

"It was such a positive experience," says Brisebois. "I wish there was a concert every week."

This is the second year the esteemed Toronto quartet, which travels internationally, has performed a series of four concerts for children with autism and their families. The series, which ends Sunday, is called Xenia, "an ancient Greek concept of welcoming and generosity shown to travellers from afar. This concept of welcoming is one of the central mandates of our series, to welcome audiences of all kinds to listen to brilliant classical music," says violinist Sarah Nematallah.

The group does almost as many free or low-cost outreach concerts as professional ones in historic concert halls. Their mantra, "music is for everyone," means they've ventured into a women's prison, juvenile correction centres, a school for the blind and seniors long-term care facilities, Nematallah says. They chose the name of their group, Cecilia, after the patron saint of music.

The chamber group, most of whom met as music students at the University of Toronto, is celebrating its 10th season. The concerts championing inclusiveness have just as much of an effect on the musicians as on the audiences, which Nematallah says are "so appreciative."

"We made a commitment. We all agree this is the sort of thing we love doing," says Min-Jeong Koh, who plays violin.

Attendance at the Xenia shows ranges from 80 to 144. Tickets are \$5 each, but every participant receives a \$5 gift certificate of some sort, making them virtually free. The space is donated by the Sony Centre.

While the music is still Beethoven, Brahms and Bach just like any other classical concert, the selections are short and there are explanations before each number.

"One or two sentences is all you need. It takes very little information to get someone engaged," says cellist Rachel Desoer.

Before they began the Xenia project, the quartet spent a year researching autism in order to fashion a program that would be respectful and anticipate

their audience's needs.

It's a rare arts event that welcomes children with autism, says Lisa Tracado, mother of 13-year-old Serena.

"We are very impressed with the professionalism of these wonderful performers."

The final Xenia Concert of the season is at Sony Centre for the Performing Arts, 1 Front St. E., May 1 at 11 a.m. Go to <http://ceciliastringquartet.com/xenia/> ceciliastringquartet.comEND for tickets.