

Xenia concerts carve out a place to bring classical music to autistic children

By [WILLIAM LITTLER](#) Special to the Toronto Star, page E4
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An anxious mother chases after her laughing daughter as she dances round the grand piano.

A smiling father sweeps his daughter into his arms after she playfully swats the keyboard.



The Bedford Trio: Alessia Disimino (violin), Andrew Ascenzo (cello), and Jialiang Zhu (piano). (PHOTO SUPPLIED/ALICE H. PHOTOGRAPHY)

Another father soothingly massages his son's back when the boy suddenly starts shaking his arms and legs.

Your typical Sony Centre concert audience? Not quite.

For one thing, the audience wasn't seated upstairs in the Centre's mainstage auditorium, but rather downstairs on folding chairs in its spacious lower lobby.

For another, some of its members were moving around as well as sitting. For this was a Xenia Concert, designed specifically for autistic and otherwise challenged children, who, quite frankly, would feel and be unwelcome in a traditional concert space.

The children and their parents were listening to the Bedford Trio playing music by Mozart, Beethoven, Dvorak and Piazzolla, the same composers a traditional audience would expect to hear in a classical chamber music concert.

Only they were listening a bit differently, with the pieces broken up into their individual movements, briefly introduced, and every now and then further separated by a one-minute pause, for performers and listeners alike to get up and stretch. For those parents and children unable to keep still there were even "fidgets," rubber balls and the like for them to play with.

The idea for all this came from the now sadly defunct all-female Cecilia String Quartet. After winning the 2010 Banff International String Quartet Competition the Toronto-based foursome began touring internationally and while in California had the opportunity to play for an audience including autistic children.

Wanting to reach out to such children and recognizing that a special approach would be necessary, the quartet consulted parents and psychologists and wound up devising a concert format with which their young listeners could feel comfortable.

And it seems to be working. Some children sat quietly throughout the hour-long concert I attended recently and some got up from time to time and started moving to the music, with the Bedford Trio (you guessed it,

they named themselves after a Toronto street) playing along without in any way appearing to be fazed.

The day before, the trio had performed another Xenia concert in Ajax and expected to have this day off until a telephone call from Chicago informed them that the originally scheduled Gryphon Trio expected to be snowbound in the Windy City. No one familiar with O'Hare Airport could have been surprised.

Luckily, the Bedford had a program ready, had studied with the Gryphon and shared its mission to help develop the audiences of tomorrow. Both ensembles are supporters of the Cecilia String Quartet's initiative.

Indeed, one of the Cecilia's founding members, Sarah Nematallah, now acts as artistic and managing director of Xenia Concerts and has presided over their growth from three concerts in 2014-15 to 20 in the current season. Plans call for further expansion across Canada — and to make the concerts universally accessible, the modestly priced \$5 tickets are exchangeable on arrival for \$5 gift cards.

The concerts obviously benefit from intimacy and an informal setting, with audiences usually numbering between 80 and 100. And not every artist with eyes on Carnegie Hall is equipped to serve children with special needs.

On top of this there are those who might argue that challenged children have a right to attend regular concerts with their parents. To them I would say that no one has a right to spoil the listening experience of others. When a child is predictably disruptive, who benefits?

On the other hand who can argue with the notion that all children deserve exposure to great music? For challenged and potentially disruptive children, Xenia Concerts provide an answer.

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