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Posted on Tuesday, 01.17.12

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Boston String Quartet brings its musical mission to Miami students

The eight-year-old Boston String Quartet, known for combining contemporary and classical styles, has been giving musical makeovers to students in Miami-Dade classrooms.



Chris Vuk shares a laugh with Westminster Christian School music students. Al Diaz / Miami Herald Staff

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BY ALEXANDRA LEON
SPECIAL TO THE MIAMI HERALD

Carlos Santana's *Oye Como Va* may not be the typical song orchestra students play, but now they can add it to their repertoire.

This Saturday, Miami-Dade middle and high school students will join the Boston String Quartet in playing Santana's signature piece, along with world fusion, rock and even themes from video games.

The concert will be at 7:30 p.m. at North Miami Beach's Littman Theater .

The eight-year-old Boston String Quartet is known for combining contemporary and classical styles and has been mentoring students around the country since 2008.

Last fall, the group created the Ethno-Urban

Orchestra, a concert event involving middle and high school musicians from orchestra, band and chorus programs in selected cities.

"We want to allow students to see the possibilities that exist in orchestra," said Christopher Vuk, 26, a Quartet violinist who has performed with artists such as Gloria Estefan, Bill Cosby and even Sesame Street.

"Typically students are playing classical music, and there's nothing wrong with classical music, but we provide an alternative for kids who want to try something else."

Vuk and Angel Valchinov, 32, the Quartet's other violinist, arrived in Miami two weeks ago and began working with students. Already, they have visited some 15 schools, and plan to visit about 10 more. By week's end, they're hoping to have attracted 100 young musicians to play in Saturday's concert.

Their lesson plan revolves around a daunting concept - improvisation.

Vuk and Valchinov are teaching students to make up their own solos over the popular riff from Deep Purple's "Smoke in the Water."

"When you solo, play loud," Valchinov, 32, told Southwood Middle School seventh and eighth-graders Tuesday. "Like, break some strings, OK?"

The students played timidly, then giggles erupted as they let out a few notes. This was music to the

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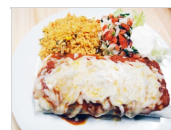
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violinists' ears.

"Right on!" said Vuk, nodding approval. That meant the students were breaking out of their comfort zones and embracing a new style.

Students at Westminster Christian School had the same reaction earlier when Vuk and Valchinov played with them.

The Quartet had a mission in mind when it began working with students around the country, Vuk said.

"We enjoy listening to contemporary music," he said. "A heck of a lot of musicians play classical. We decided we didn't want to do that because there's hardly any groups that play contemporary."

He remembers his own high school days when the majority of students quit orchestra classes "because they hated it."

"If so many kids hated it, there's something wrong," he said.

After Miami, they will take their musical message to Iowa, then Tennessee and Ohio.

Jessica Forbes, 17, a Westminster senior and violinist, won't let this opportunity pass her by. She plans to practice on her own this week, even before Friday's rehearsal workshop.

"It's so rewarding," said Forbes, who hopes to major in music and medicine at the University of Florida. "Being in orchestra is one of the highlights of high school." For 13-year-old Chantavia Mathis, an eighth grade bassist at Southwood, playing in the concert would be the chance of a lifetime.

"I would die," she said.

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Jeremiah O. Kennedy

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This is a great idea. I couldn't help but notice, however, that the two schools cited (Southwood Middle and Westminster Christian) are an Arts Magnet School and a private school. Those kids already have an appreciation for, and an understanding of, decent music. It's the kids in the "regular" public schools who need that education. To them, Lil' Wayne and Alicia Keyes are the pinnacles of the musical world, and that is really, really sad.

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