
Constellations Chamber Concerts Brings The Concert Truck to DC

The Concert Truck visited DC over a spring weekend, creating smiles and memories for young and old alike. Sponsored by Constellations Chamber Concerts, professional musicians played six engaging concerts from the Truck's built-in stage. Young smiles broke out at Horton's Kids in Southeast, and senior smiles emerged among residents at a retirement home in Northeast. At six sites around the city, audiences and passersby were treated to blues, boogie woogie, tango, and classical selections.

Inspiration for the itinerant project came from Ellen Hwangbo, a pianist and Artistic Director of Constellations Chamber Concerts. Constellations brings together top musicians who perform innovative cross-genre programs. With generous support from the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, Constellations engaged Baltimore-based The Concert Truck. A marvel to behold, The Concert Truck has a pull-out stage, a piano, sound system, lights in many colors, and virtually everything else needed for a quality concert experience.



From left: Ellen Hwangbo, Rubén Rengel, Nick Luby

The weather over the three days, March 31 to April 2, 2023, was variable. Spring had not yet firmly displaced winter. Union Market was the site of the first concert at lunchtime on Friday. Drawn by the music, patrons sat outside warmed by the music. Many stayed for the entire two-part program, while others enjoyed just a few moments.



From left: Rubén Rengel, Nick Luby, and Jeff Stern

The Concert Truck then moved on to La Cosecha for a 5:30 show. This was prime dog walking time, and neighbors lingered with their canine companions. One listener enthusiastically thanked the musicians for playing a tango by his favorite composer – Astor Piazzolla. And did we notice a young couple, moved by the performance of “Deep River,” sneak a kiss? We won't tell.

Saturday morning brought rain and debate about whether the show would go on at Horton’s Kids in Southeast. At the 11:30 am start time, one boy arrived. Intent on giving him a good experience, the musicians invited the youngster into the truck and onto the stage, where an awning provided shelter from the drizzle. Several other children soon came along. The small audience, both in number and age, all sat right on the stage. The musicians engaged them with conversation and music. As the event progressed, the children tried out the piano, marimba, and drums. The event culminated in a spontaneous jam session with the musicians and kids all playing together.

Cellist Christine Lamprea warms-up on the sidewalk before going on stage



Shandell Richards, Chief Program Officer with Horton’s Kids, said: “It was a joy just to watch our kids engage with classical music.” She particularly values giving the children experiences that they would otherwise be unlikely to have. “This was amazing, and I hope that you guys come back!”

Saturday afternoon brought the modern-day troubadours outside the Congress Heights Arts and Culture Center on MLK Avenue in Southeast. Here the audience was primarily passersby, plus people waiting at a nearby bus stop. The bilingual talents of violinist Rubén Rengel and cellist Christine Lamprea enhanced the performance for the Spanish speakers who paused to listen.

All the musicians engaged for the weekend are top performers with professional careers. As Ellen Hwangbo explained, “these aren’t your average street musicians.” Rengel and Lamprea, who both play internationally, came for the weekend from New York City. Jeff Stern, a brilliant percussionist, teaches at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore. Susan Zhang and Nick Luby, both gifted pianists, built The Concert Truck and have toured with it across the country. The musicians, with Hwangbo included, performed together in various combinations. Everyone, including several Constellations board members, pitched in at each location to open the truck and set the stage.



One musical program was Latin/Spanish inspired, and the other featured jazz, blues, and spirituals. Each program offered an eclectic mix of composers from yesterday to today, across varied musical styles. Several performers also improvised together on-the-spot, taking suggestions from the audience for the theme of each collaborative creation. As Nick Luby explained before each improvisation, “We’re creating this piece especially for you. It’s never been heard before and will never be heard again.”



On Sunday, the weather turned into spring. With a National Park Service permit in hand, The Concert Truck parked by the Washington Monument. Many hundreds of racers were finishing the Cherry Blossom ten miler on the Monument grounds, while tourists and area residents strolled along the Mall enjoying the trees. Music from The Concert Truck drew people of all ages,

who stood or sat on the ground to enjoy the entertainment. It was an unexpected, special moment during their time in the city.



From left: Ellen Hwangbo, Rubén Rengel, Nick Luby, Jeff Stern, Susan Zhang, and Christine Lamprea.

“We do need something positive and some beauty because it has been a tough week for us.”

– Sister Constance, Little Sisters of the Poor

The musical tour ended on Sunday afternoon with a program at the retirement home, located on Harewood Road NE, run by the Little Sisters of the Poor. The home is open to the neediest elderly of every race and religion. The outdoor format was ideal because earlier in the week the home had faced a Covid outbreak affecting six people. As Sister Constance explained, “We do need something positive and some beauty because it has been a tough week for u2. Several of the sisters are sick, so the rest of us are holding down the fort.” During the

concert about a dozen residents and staff sat outside, while others were able to hear the music inside the building through open windows. The applause after each selection was generous and heartfelt.

Percussionist Jeff Stern expressed his own appreciation in a message several weeks after the events. “The whole Constellations family is a special group of people, and it’s been nothing but a pleasure getting involved and working with you.”

Constellations Chamber Concerts is grateful to all the musicians and supporters, especially the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities, who made possible this experience that brought smiles to so many people in the District.

For more information, contact:

Constellations Chamber Concerts
Ellen Hwangbo
hwangbo@constellationsmusic.org
www.constellationsmusic.org



Photo credits: Ann Franke and Hae-Soon Hahn