

# Burlington Ensemble

## A WIN-WIN PROPOSITION

BY SARAH ZOBEL



IN LAUNCHING BURLINGTON ENSEMBLE, violinists Sofia Hirsch and Michael Dabroski tweaked the time-tested concept of the benefit concert to come up with an approach that allows them to raise funds for nonprofit organizations around the state while introducing classical music to new listeners. They established the ensemble in 2009, using a unique business structure—one that wouldn't involve board oversight or compete with other arts organizations for limited public dollars. The fact that Hirsch and Dabroski would be able to increase their own playing time was just an added perk. ▶

Above: Ed Wilkens of the Stern Center for Language and Learning greeting Burlington Ensemble Artistic Directors Michael Dabroski and Sofia Hirsch after a "Summer Serenades" concert at All Souls Interfaith Gathering, Shelburne, Vermont. Photo by Michael GW Stein. Opposite: Burlington Ensemble Artistic Directors Sofia Hirsch and Michael Dabroski. Photo by Rick Levinson.









### Growing the Audience, Helping the Community

"If we could combine playing music of a high quality with using it for a purpose," says Dabroski of the decisions he and Hirsch make as co-artistic directors, "then we're going to be able to grow more audience and also help the community." Burlington Ensemble—or BE, as it's known—has already met those expectations, collaborating with 25 nonprofits to raise more than \$38,000. With some 3,000 nonprofit organizations around Vermont, the opportunities seem limitless. It's a model that has attracted the attention of musicians nationwide.

"People say, 'How come nobody's ever thought of it before?'" says Hirsch, a Shelburne native who "grew up" in the Vermont Youth Orchestra. In BE's 90/10 series, each concert designates one nonprofit that will receive 90 percent of the proceeds, with the remaining 10 percent going to BE. Recipients have included Vermont FEED, Hunger Free Vermont, the Intervale Center, Bixby Memorial Library, and Vermont Family Network, among others; they are tasked with securing the venue and handling all publicity.

For their part, Hirsch and Dabroski choose the music and select local and New York-based musicians to join them—to date, they've worked with nearly 60, with anywhere from 1 to 17 people on stage at a time. Concert themes have included "Giving Bach," "Baroque, but Going," and "Precocious Prodigies." In 2014, in honor of BE's fifth season, they're looking at quintets.

"In the standard board-directed nonprofit, the music and the musicians are lost," says Dabroski. "With our model, we feel like we can invest directly in musicians and collaboration—and an idea—and let that speak for itself. That's the shift." ►







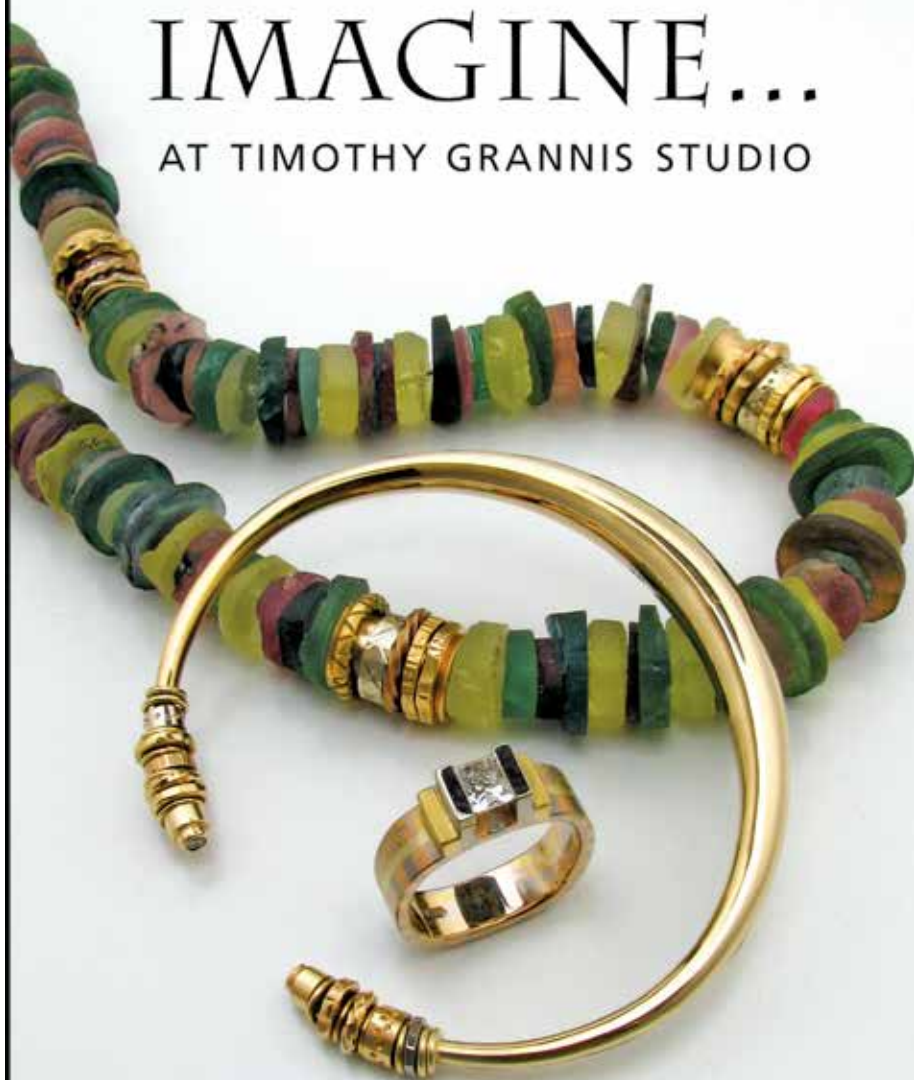
From far left: A Burlington Ensemble "live on-air" performance of Mendelssohn's *Octet* at Vermont Public Radio (VPR) in Colchester, Vermont, August 2013. Burlington Ensemble "Summer Serenades" concerts at the Coach Barn, Shelburne Farms, Vermont, and (below) at All Souls Interfaith Gathering, Shelburne, Vermont. Photos by Jill Rinehart. Photo, below right, by Michael GW Stein.





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## The Future of Classical Music

The word “collaboration” comes up often, and Hirsch and Dabroski say that this kind of approach is the future of classical music. “It’s not a matter of whether someone likes classical music or not,” says Dabroski, an alumnus of the Manhattan School of Music. “It’s a matter of do they believe in a community experience that can make it better for everybody.” Limiting the staff to two is a matter of efficiency, he says, but it also shines a spotlight on the question of how performing arts dollars are being put to use.

And affordability is a cornerstone of the BE mission; the majority of ticket prices are kept to a reasonable \$10 to \$15. Cost has affected audience demographics—“You have the most young people I’ve seen at a concert!” Hirsch has been told, and she’s quick to refute any suggestion that classical music is fading away. To help keep it relevant, BE has several programs geared just for the under-18 crowd that are underwritten by the concerts. One of those is Summer Time, a weeklong experience for a select group from Burlington’s Boys and Girls Club. Participants, many of whom have never left the city’s confines, spend their mornings in violin lessons and their afternoons outside, on the lake, and at Shelburne Farms and Northern Lights Rock and Ice.

The String Quartet Project is another BE offering. Using Music-COMP, an online music-composition mentoring program, SQP students write string quartets that BE artists then perform before live audiences.



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Burlington Ensemble "Summer Serenades" group photo at the Coach Barn, Shelburne Farms, Vermont. Photo by Mary Bonhag.

Since summer 2012, some 25 works written by composers ranging in age from 7 to 17 have been premiered—one, by Justin Gates of Franklin, won the 2013 Vermont All-State Composition contest. Hirsch says it increases the relevance exponentially for the composer to hear his or her work performed before an audience of 300, and SQP premieres are another avenue to reach young audiences, since composers routinely bring friends to hear their work being played.

CJ Spirito, director of Burlington's Rock Point School, one 90/10 beneficiary, says his faculty understands the reality that today's students are technologically oriented, and partnering with BE and Music-COMP has allowed them to teach a healthy integration of technology with real-world, practical skills.

"Here are these people who are playing instruments that have been played for hundreds of years," Spirito says of BE's musicians, "and yet they compose online—and they're working together and communicating." In addition, Spirito encourages students to volunteer at BE events as ticket takers, parking attendants, and crew. Rock Point receives 10 complimentary tickets per performance, and Spirito gives them to students who are familiar with classical music, as well as to those who are not. ▶

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## BE SHARP, a Different Kind of Collaboration

Vermont Public Radio classical music host Joe Goetz, a concert pianist who has performed twice with BE, is thrilled to see how the ensemble's efforts to grow classical music's audience are paying off. "For a long time, classical and chamber music have been on a high pedestal," says Goetz. "They were almost inaccessible to the general population." But BE concerts attract more than "just the usual suspects." Goetz is also a driving force behind the Beethoven Project, a partnership between BE and VPR that has included recording in advance the pieces that will be featured at this year's 90/10 concerts and offering them as free downloads on VPR's website.

Hirsch and Dabroski are both busy with other ventures as well, including playing with the Vermont Symphony Orchestra, Burlington Chamber Orchestra, and other groups; in addition, Dabroski was recently appointed director of music at Burlington College to build a School of Music. Despite that, the two have tripled this year's 90/10 series, playing each program at Castleton—they are artists in residence at Burlington College—at Shelburne Museum or the Spruce Peak Performing Arts Center in Stowe and in Burlington.

And in January, they'll begin a very different project, a collaboration with Jim Hudziak, MD, director of The Vermont Center for Children, Youth and Families, that they're calling BE SHARP (Burlington Ensemble Strings Help Access Real Progress). For 10 weeks, 50 children



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Left: Burlington Ensemble "90/10 Series" concert at College Street Congregational Church, Burlington. Photo by Michael GW Stein. Below: Burlington Ensemble Artistic Directors Sofia Hirsch and Michael Dabroski. Photo by Rick Levinson.

selected from the Center will receive introductory violin lessons from Hirsch and Dabroski three days a week; during that time, their parents will be coached in parenting skills. The program will culminate in a recital. If Hudziak can come up with the funding, he'll take before-and-after neuroimaging scans of each child to support recent findings that violin training leads to the development of key areas of the brain that are associated with better behavioral control and decreased anxiety and aggression.

For Hirsch and Dabroski, both of whom started playing at age 5, it's just another piece of the community collaboration. "I don't know two people who really just love making music more than Michael and Sofia do," says VPR's Goetz. ❄️



#### 90/10 Series

January 2-4, American Made  
February 6-8, Beyond Beethoven  
March 20-22, French Connection  
April 3-5, Large Czechs

Tickets are available through [burlingtonensemble.com](http://burlingtonensemble.com).  
Beethoven Project performance downloads are available at [vpr.net](http://vpr.net).

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