

# New York City radio drive collects 2,500 musical instruments for public school students

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A New York City classical radio station recently completed a drive to collect used musical instruments that will be refurbished and distributed to music programs in the city's public schools.

A total of 2,500 instruments were collected in the 10-day drive conducted by WQXR that ended on April 7. They included flutes, guitars, clarinets and some less common instruments, including a xylophone, a Chinese pipa, accordions and mandolins.

The number greatly exceeded the original target of 1,000 instruments. The success of the drive undoubtedly reflects strong support for cultural programs in the schools, and for the instruments getting into the hands of interested students who would not otherwise have the opportunity to learn and play.

One of the more moving acts of generosity was that of a 91-year-old man, a Holocaust survivor, who donated a violin he purchased for a pittance in a displaced persons camp in 1947.

Graham Parker, the station's general manager, "was surprised by the level of excitement behind the program," as reported on the WQXR website. "I have been humbled by the personal stories that have accompanied many of the donations. It becomes very real for people to think of their once-used instrument making its way into the hands of a student who can create new memories."

The next step will be the repair or refurbishing of the instruments, in partnership with Sam Ash Music Stores and Mr. Holland's Opus Foundation, the non-profit founded by the composer for the music for the 1995 film *Mr. Holland's Opus*, Michael Kamen (1948–2003).

WQXR has had an uneven recent history. Owned and operated for decades as a classical music station by the *New York Times*, it was sold in 2009 to the nonprofit

New York Public Radio, which also operates WNYC, the news and talk public radio station in the New York area.

WQXR's programming has remained on a fairly serious level. It has an online blog that contains useful reports, and it operates an Operavore stream of continuous opera recordings.

At the same time, the station is typical of non-profits operating within the current financial and social climate. Its CEO, Laura Walker, is paid more than half-a-million dollars annually, even as the station holds twice-yearly on-air fund drives urging hard-pressed listeners to come up with contributions. Ms. Walker was recently named one of New York City's Most Powerful Women by *Crain's New York Business*, one of the voices of the city's corporate and financial elite.

Along the same lines, based no doubt on its market research, the station insists on talking down to its listeners and targeting an audience of harried executives and professionals with the misleading and false appeal that classical music is needed for "relaxation" during or after a busy day.

There is some talk of the instrument drive becoming an annual event. While such a development would certainly be welcome from one point of view, any suggestion that this is an adequate substitute for full and expanded arts funding in the city's schools, as part of the provision of quality education for the city's working class majority, must be thoroughly rejected.

Coincidentally but not accidentally, the station's instrument drive took place just as the city's comptroller's office released a report showing that 20 percent of the city's schools have neither a full- nor part-time certified arts teacher.

The official report called attention to the fact that, as the local CBS news station website reported, "Despite

widely-acknowledged benefits, as well as clearly established mandates in New York State Education Law, the provision of arts education in New York City’s public schools has become both inequitable and underfunded.”

The State Department of Education says that students “should have multiple opportunities every year to experience art and culture outside their school building,” but this guideline, remaining only a recommendation, is ignored in practice. Twenty-five percent of the city’s high schools and 24 percent of its middle schools have no partnership with cultural institutions.

This outrage has been worsening for decades, even as the indices of inequality have reached record levels. The poorest neighborhoods are disproportionately affected by the budget cuts. In the South Bronx and Central Brooklyn, which contain 31 percent of the city’s schools, almost half of the schools are without any arts programming at all. This, in a city whose elite boasts that it is “the center of the art world”!



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