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PSO Online Concert Series Features Buskaid Soweto String Ensemble



MUSICAL MIRACLE: The Princeton Symphony Orchestra presents the Buskaid Soweto String Ensemble in the first of five specially curated concerts January 29-31. The young musicians have been trained at the project's renowned school in South Africa. (Photo by Graham De Lacy)

By Anne Levin

Eighteen months ago, the Princeton Symphony Orchestra (PSO) took a group of trustees to South Africa. A highlight of the trip was time spent with the Buskaid Soweto String Ensemble, known throughout the country as a world-class orchestra of young musicians from challenging circumstances.

Thanks largely to that visit, the PSO is presenting a five-concert, on-demand series that begins Friday, January 29. *Buskaid – A Musical Miracle* was curated by the organization's founder and music director, Rosemary Nalden, who put the archival material together during the lockdown caused by COVID-19. PSO Executive

Director Marc Uys, a South African violinist himself, was a Buskaid fan long before the fateful trip with the trustees.

“For me, this is a wonderful thing,” he said last week. “What is really striking about Buskaid is the energy and incredible style they have, around a wide variety of genres. They are especially amazing with Baroque music. They open concerts with that. It’s a very particular school of string playing which comes from Rosemary herself. She worked in that world for decades before she started this group.”

It was back in 1991 that Nalden, a British violist, heard on the BBC about a string project in Soweto experiencing financial difficulties. The same story appeared in a newspaper a year later. “It was by pure chance that I heard and read both reports, which immediately sparked a fascination in me to discover that classical stringed instruments were being taught in Soweto,” she said in an email. “I wanted to help, so together with around 120 friends, I organized a simultaneous ‘busk’ in 17 British rail stations, mainly in London, which took place in March 1992. We collected around 6,000 pounds, which was quite a lot of money in those days!”

Nalden made up the name “Buskaid.” To “busk” is to go into a public space and perform, usually as a musician, to raise money, for a cause or for yourself.

By 1996, Nalden was spending considerable time in South Africa, helping the organization overcome financial difficulties. A year later, she rented her London flat out and “took the plunge,” she said. The project reopened in a single room attached to a priest’s house near the original location. All children were invited to join, but some were threatened by other area factions. Despite several attempts to deter her, Nalden stayed on.

“I thought it would be easy to attract local teachers to join me and then leave them in charge,” she said. “But I hadn’t bargained for the (very understandable) fear which many white South Africans feel when they visit Soweto, something which still holds true, albeit to a lesser extent. Finding teachers to join me was a huge challenge, and as a result, I stayed for another year. Large numbers of local children began to flock to our little project and I turned away dozens, if not hundreds. In 1998 I realized that we desperately needed a bigger space.”

The motivation for Buskaid is similar to the famed El Sistema program started in Venezuela. But Buskaid has been in operation longer than El Sistema. The program has grown. There are currently 120 children enrolled in its music school. In 23 years, the performing ensemble has undertaken 26 international tours. The organization also runs an in-house teacher-training scheme, and currently employs 12 ensemble members as assistant and trainee teachers. The idea is not just to train string players. While some of the graduates do go on to musical careers, the focus is to provide a

safe haven to those who need it, at the same time building self-esteem.

“Quite simply we do not choose them – they choose us,” said Nalden of the students in the program. “We have never actively tried to recruit children to come to Buskaid. For the most part, children come because they have a friend, relative, classmate, who is already attending, and they also want to learn an instrument. Sometimes they’ve seen or heard a violin and they are fascinated. One boy came because he had seen a picture of a violin in a schoolbook and he wanted to touch the real thing.”

Performances by Buskaid always incorporate movement. “Our teaching approach has, at its heart, movement – of a very specific kind. It is there to release tension and encourage freedom so that the instrument almost becomes an integral part of the body,” said Nalden. “When I first started teaching in Soweto, I was amazed at the ease at which this aspect of my teaching was accepted and accomplished. There was a very obvious transition to dance – both as a part of a group lesson, for example – and as a part of their performances of their own township music, Kwela.” (Kwela is defined as a South African style of music based on jazzy undertones and derived from the marabi sound).

Buskaid performs music from the early Baroque to the 21st century. They also play classic pop, Afro-pop, and some jazz, on instruments donated from all over the world. “All in all, we own well over 300 instruments,” said Nalden. “Our big problem now is storage of those instruments not in use, as that modest Music School we built in 1999 for 35 students and two teachers now houses around 120 students and 14 teachers!”

The January 29-31 opener presented by the PSO includes the third movement of Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 13 in C Major performed with guest artist Melvyn Tan, Max Bruch’s *Romanze for Solo Viola and Orchestra* featuring Buskaid-trained artist Tiisetso Mashishi, and Princeton-based composer Julian Grant’s *Sancho’s Dance-Mix*, a suite after dances by Ignatius Sancho. The program also includes popular vocals and Kwela.

Each concert in the series is available on-demand over a three-day weekend for a \$5 per access link. Visit princetonsymphony.org.

“You see this old school tradition, a musical aesthetic that comes through,” said Uys. “When they play Mozart, for instance, the phrasing is amazing. It is never static. You always have this sense of energy and enthusiasm. And then when they play Kwela music, Rosemary tends to stand to the side of the stage, and they take it away with dance and physical movement while they play. So it feels like they have this perfect marriage of their tradition and the very deep, old tradition of string playing. But it is incredibly relevant and belongs with the youth of today.”