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ENSEMBLE WORK

## An original work of art

Harvard-educated composer and Sharpstown band students create music together

By TARA DOOLEY

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Nick Diaz, from left, and Ismael Tovar put together the marimba before the Sollopa Ten.

Mayra Beltran Houston Chronicle

It finally started making sense to Ismael Tovar the day of the test-run performance before a high school audience, two weeks before the big show.

Composing music was a little like welding. But the pieces to be fitted together were melody, harmony and rhythm. The craftsmen were Tovar and nine fellow musicians from the Sharpstown High School band.

"Before, we would play a lot of things and I didn't get it," said Tovar, an 18-year-old marimba player. "On the day of the performance I finally got it. I could tell where things were going."

It was an epiphany nearly five months in the making.

Since the end of January, Tovar had been part of the group, dubbed the Sollopa Ten, that met nearly weekly with professional composer Kurt Stallmann for an experiment in creativity, collaboration and composition. Their goal was to create a work to be performed before a Houston Symphony concert in The Woodlands.

The preview at Sharpstown High School in May had disintegrated at the end.

With just five sessions before the June 13 concert, the piece wasn't finished. Details were missing, and the music was not written out on paper. At least one session would be needed to rehearse the finished piece.

There was work to do and a deadline.

"I feel like it is still missing some stuff," Tovar said. "... I feel like I know what is going to happen, but it could change at any time."

Actually, the time for any change was upon them.

The past months had been an introduction to composition, a new musical experience for the 10 teenagers.

Stallmann had started by teaching the basics and leading the Sollopa Ten in exercises about rhythm, pitch, harmony and melody.

Then he asked the group to compose solo pieces, then duets and finally two quintets.

"What this piece basically is is meshing the two quintets together," Stallmann said.

The Sollopa Ten was culled from the Sharpstown band by director Brenda Corral-Smith. The name, Sollopa, reversed the spelling of the school mascot, the Apollos.

The gig was organized through the Houston Symphony and paid for by Fidelity Investments, a mutual-fund company that helps school performing-arts programs in low-income areas of Boston, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and Houston. The idea was to support teens in the arts, encouraging them to stay in school, said Fidelity spokeswoman Jennifer K. Brown. The company also aimed to bolster the sometimes lackluster local support for high school arts programs.

The Houston Symphony worked with Fidelity and the Mr. Holland's Opus Foundation to add money and expertise to the band programs at Sharpstown High and John Marshall Middle School, said Roger Daily, the symphony's director of education and outreach. Marshall is a fine arts magnet school, but Sharpstown was not known as "one of the best music schools in the city," Daily said. It was chosen because it had a little band working hard to improve under the relatively new and enthusiastic Corral-Smith.

"We were looking for an environment where we thought we could add 'Miracle-Gro' and it would make a difference," Daily said.

At Sharpstown, the "Miracle-Gro" arrived as free tickets to symphony concerts and private lessons from symphony players. Sharpstown and Marshall also received about \$26,000 each in new instruments. At Sharpstown that meant an infusion of trumpets, baritones, clarinets, French horns and flutes. A piccolo and baritone saxophone were also in the mix.

Sharpstown also got Stallmann.

"He opens up your mind to different ways of thinking," said 15-year-old clarinetist Concepcion Cisneros. "He tells you about weird concerts and things on YouTube."

As an assistant professor of composition at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music, Stallmann's day job involves advising doctoral candidates and working with graduate and undergraduate composers, most of whom have devoted decades and dollars to music by the time they arrive in his classroom.

Stallmann, 43, began playing the piano at 5. In college he decided to become a composer and earned a doctorate at Harvard. His teaching credentials include stints at Harvard and Rice. And now Sharpstown High School.

Tovar was lured as a sophomore into the band by Corral-Smith to play percussion instruments.

Corral-Smith had just arrived at Sharpstown, and only nine players were listed on the rolls. But she harbored dreams of building the band into a much larger ensemble known in the city for great musicianship, not just marching or dancing.

To bolster her numbers, Corral-Smith took to wandering the halls looking for students who seemed like they needed a place to belong.

That's where she found Tovar.

"I was one of those people who walked around," Tovar said. "I didn't do anything but sleep, eat and do it again. Joining the band gave me something to do. It inspired me to be something in life."

After three years in the band, Tovar graduated from high school and has been accepted to Sam Houston State University.

Before Fidelity ponied up new instruments, Corral-Smith had cruised pawn shops looking for good deals that parents could afford on incomes often earned from cleaning or construction, she said. Jorge Aguero played an instrument so badly dented it was hard to draw out a sound. Now he carefully keeps a shiny new tuba in a padded box.

Since the test-run performance, school had ended for summer. The Sharpstown campus was relatively quiet, the brick courtyard abandoned. Tovar and three other members had graduated. Only the band hall was hopping as the Sollopa Ten gathered in the windowless cinderblock room with gray stained carpet and fluorescent lighting.

With five rehearsals and eight days till showtime, Stallmann was ready to kick it into high gear.

Wearing shorts and sandals, he unpacked a laptop and pulled a mini piano keyboard out of a brown Whole Foods grocery sack with the words "Go Local" imprinted on it.

"What I'd like to do today is clean this up a bit," Stallmann said as the group settled into a row behind black metal music stands, "and what we all need to do is extend it, make it richer."

As Tovar helped Stallmann hook up the laptop to a speaker, the teenage composers moved in closer to get a look at Stallmann's music notation program.

The goal for the rehearsal was to expand the first part of the three-part piece. So the students needed to work with a tune first imagined by Cisneros and her quintet.

"It doesn't have to be that melody," Stallmann said. "It can be shifted to keep it alive."

"It is breaking dawn," Tovar offered as inspiration.

So how does dawn break, musically? Stallmann asked. By changing rhythms, by writing lines with more moving notes, the group decided.

Trombone player Thomas Gomez put his instrument to his mouth, and Stallmann drew a first suggestion out of the 16-year-old. From there Stallmann went down the line, demanding that each musician improvise a variation on the main theme.

After each attempt, Stallmann played back the student's musical idea on the little keyboard and noted his or her suggestions in the laptop. As the two-hour rehearsal came to an end, Stallmann promised to take their improvisations home with him and return the next day with a version that incorporated — on paper — the new ideas.

It was a step forward for the new composers.

Outgoing drum major Laura Martinez, 18, started playing the saxophone in the seventh grade because she wanted something to focus on besides earning good grades, she said.

But after Corral-Smith took over the band when she was a sophomore, Martinez's reasons for playing evolved. Corral-Smith introduced her to recordings of many kinds of music, which inspired her. Though she once practiced to get an A in class, the music started meaning more than a grade, she said.

"I practice for that, but I practice because I want to get better," she said. "I like the way it sounds when you become a good player. I have a passion for this."

Her passion has turned into plans for the future. Martinez has been accepted to the music program at Sam Houston State. She is the first person in her family to graduate from high school.

Like Martinez, trumpet player Matthew Thomas was a good student. He'll attend the University of Texas in the fall. He plans to major in biology, though he hopes to continue playing and may minor in music, he said.

He regrets the two years he did not play the trumpet at all. He returned after being plopped into a band class to fill a hole in his schedule. Corral-Smith figured out that Thomas had training in elementary and middle school and quickly promoted him in the program.

"I guess it was a calling from God to put me back in band," Thomas, 18, said.

After a three-day break for the weekend, the band reconvened on a Tuesday. Tenor sax player Ismael Romero was missing. As the band's next drum major he was at training camp. But Rosendo Castillo was there to fill in on tenor sax.

The first and second parts of the composition were complete and notated on sheet music. The teens were facing some new notes that Stallmann added based on their ideas.

What followed was a painstaking rehearsal in which Stallmann and the teens focused on intonation, playing measures repeatedly until they improved. Two hours of rehearsal concluded as Stallmann accused the brass section of falling asleep.

The performance had progressed, but the piece still lacked an ending. An extra session was required. Stallmann left it up to the group to handle.

"Really it could be anything," he said. "Surprise me. But we really have to have something by tomorrow."

By the time Stallmann returned the next day, the Sollopa Ten had created an ending that featured a drum solo for 15-year-old Nicolas Diaz and a return to the first melody with a crescendo of sound and intensity that ended with a crash.

The day after that, the group had pounded their piece into shape and decided on a name: Triformis Praecentio, Latin for three-part musical prelude.

"It's good," Tovar said. "It's done, finally. I feel like everything finally locked in. I just want to play already."

That time arrived the next day, June 13.

After a final practice and one last run-through, the band boarded a bus, complete with Ismael Romero, who had returned from drum-major camp.

They were now the Sollopa Ten Plus One, as the band members referred to themselves, because Castillo had stayed to double the tenor saxophone part.

The destination was the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion, where the group would warm up the audience for a Houston Symphony concert of popular pieces called "Musical Road Trip."

Set up on a side stage just inside the pavilion's entrances, the group was facing an audience gathered at tables near the front of the stage. But there were also families and pedestrians intrigued as much by the free ice cream as by the teenage composers.

This band had played for many a stranger before. After a brass quintet from the Houston Symphony and a clarinet quartet of Sharpstown students, the composer/performers took the stage. After they settled in, Stallmann introduced the group and announced the piece, and said the group would play it twice.

"This is the premiere performance," Stallmann explained to the crowd. "Tonight you will hear a piece of music that didn't exist before."

The first time was smooth enough, especially considering that Cisneros' music sheets flew off her stand and Stallmann fought to keep his pages in place as he conducted.

But the second time, the group really focused, and the wind died down. The Sollopa Ten Plus One aced it.

After months of preparation and an intense week of composing and rehearsing, the teens had taken ideas from 11 musicians, welded them together and presented the world with a new work of art, Tovar said.

"It felt like an accomplishment," he said.

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