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Classical NY meets Chicago percussion

String Quartet and Englewood drum corps collaborate

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It would be safe to assume that few have experienced a concert hall performance featuring a collaboration between groups as antithetical as Ethel String Quartet and Kaotic Drumline. These two musical entities are separated by not only geography (Ethel is a string band based in New York while Kaotic is based in Chicago) but also rhythmic purpose.



ETHEL's Dorothy Lawson | Photo Credit: Josh Hawkins

One looks to create a aural tranquility in their listeners via sweeping orchestral violins and violas, while the other looks to use drums to elicit a visceral physical response in its listeners.

Yet both are acutely aware of the unifying power of music and have chosen to collaborate throughout the week.

They participated in five performances on the West Side in the days following the Dr. Martin Luther King holiday.

The shows culminated in a performance at Dominican University, 7900 W. Division, River Forest on Jan. 27.

It all began on April 5, 2007 when Ethel String Quartet was performing with jazz musician Howard Levy at the Pick-Staiger Concert Hall of Northwestern University. Following the set, Ethel was approached by Leslie Rodriguez, managing director of the performing arts center at Dominican University.

"I was planning our fourth annual chamber series which spotlights both traditional and contemporary chamber artists," said Rodriguez, "and felt that Ethel perfectly captured the contemporary chamber sound."

Ethel agreed to the performance and felt the concert would offer ample opportunity to provide a continuation of the band's Truck Stop Project which has been ongoing for nearly four years.

Truck Stop Project allows the band to collaborate with a local musician in the towns of their performances. The band shares the stage, musical ideas and creative inspiration with an artist or group on the road for the duration of their trip.

"The 'Truck Stop Project' came about from our touring," said Ethel viola player Ralph Farris. "We had encountered so many amazing people and musicians in the cities we visited, yet we did not have a chance to really spend any time with them."

"This was a way we could actually spend time with local saxophonist and brass groups that we would otherwise not have time to connect with."

Pick-Staiger Concert Hall Director Richard Van Kleeck suggested the band perform with Kaotic Drumline, a group based in Chicago's Englewood community.

Van Kleeck put Farris in touch with Eric Olton, who serves as both the manager for Kaotic and game operator for the WNBA franchise Chicago Sky. Olton told Kaotic's founder and director, Jamie Poindexter, about Ralph's interest in collaborating, and he was instantly intrigued.

"I was very hooked into the idea of performing with a violin quartet," said Poindexter. "I was especially interested when I first spoke to Ralph. He had as much enthusiasm as anyone I've ever spoken business with."

Prior to their respective groups meeting two weeks later, Farris and Poindexter listened to the work of the other. They wanted to gauge the best way to meld their individual sounds into a cohesive whole.

"The meshing of classical music and Drumline is something that has not been done before, so this is history in the making," said Poindexter.

After the collaboration was finalized, Leslie, Jamie and Ralph decided to expand the original concert premise even further by incorporating an outreach element to the proceedings. Rodriguez contacted Steckman Studios in Oak Park to organize a performance at Brooks Middle School on Jan. 23.



*Kaotic Drumline's Elisha Brown
Photo Credit: Josh Hawkins*

On Jan. 24, the groups performed a workshop/demo at the Circle Rock Campus of Catalyst School, located in the Austin community at 5608 W. Washington Blvd., and is affiliated with the San Miguel schools.

These performances followed a special performance at Brookfield Zoo on Jan. 22. The week climaxed with Sunday's performance at Dominican University, where the fruits of the sessions were fully displayed.

"This is the first time we have had a collaborative musical program to the extent that we have with Ethel and Kaotic Drumline," said Jessica Mackinnon, director of public relations for Dominican.

"But it is something that we want to continue to offer and enhance."