

“We Were a Captive Audience”

An Outreach Concert at a California State Prison

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Outreach concerts and other such off-campus performances should be commonplace and regular activities for our college and university music ensembles. These concerts are an important and essential component of the collegiate ensemble experience. Such outreach concerts also fulfill certain fundamental objectives of academia’s mission. The California State University proclaims the CSUs are “working for California,” and the University of California boasts itself to be a university “for,

by and of California.” Clearly the off-campus concert given by a collegiate ensemble is, at its very core, part of the university mission.

Last December the California State University, Northridge Wind Ensemble presented an unprecedented outreach concert at one of California’s state prisons – home to some of our state’s “fourth world population.” Located in Corona, the California Institution for Women (CIW) is a Level I–III prison for female offenders. In addition to its large general population, CIW houses inmates with spe-





CSUN Wind Ensemble students with security identification badges.

cial needs such as pregnancy, psychiatric care, methadone, and medical problems such as HIV infection. CIW also serves as a higher security facility for female inmates in Administrative Segregation.

The California Institution for Women opened in 1952 and, except for the security perimeter, largely resembles a community college campus from that decade. Indeed, the campus-like design was in keeping with the 1950s' progressive notion of rehabilitation. It was originally called Frontera, a feminine derivative of the word frontier. Until 1987, CIW was California's only prison for female felons. Designed for an inmate population of 1,080, the current bed count at CIW surpasses 1,900.

Planning for the CSUN Wind Ensemble's performance at CIW began four months in advance of the concert date. The logistics for such a concert were considerable. A formal security clearance was required of each member of the band. Every aspect of the concert was scrutinized beforehand. Even our concert attire required approval by the prison warden.

One month prior to the concert the CIW chaplain and a volunteer visited the CSUN campus to speak with the Wind Ensemble musicians. The students received a thorough briefing about concert day logistics along with a detailed review of prison procedures and protocols. Any student concerns about safety were also answered.

The chaplain also shared with us this letter from the CIW inmates:

Dear Students:

The incarcerated women here at the California Institution for Women would very much appreciate you all taking time out of your busy schedule to come and play for us. We never have the opportunity for live music here. We barely have access to music as we do not have access to the digital world you all have access to. Some of us have never seen a cell phone or even used a phone without a cord attached to a wall. For many of us, this will be a brand new experience we have never had before – to be able to see the instruments and the musicians up close would be extremely special. Some of us have never seen a cello before or anything else. For those of us who have had the experience of a concert, it has been so long that it would be a joy to be transported by the beauty of music. The Christmas season is notoriously difficult because it is miserable to be in prison during this time – away from family, friends, etc. A concert would give us a couple of hours from the mundane.

For those of us who are older, seeing amazing young people will be special. For those of us who are younger as you are, seeing people our age will give us hope... help us see the possibility of other things and other ways. Thank you for considering us. You are welcome here in our virtual reality.

- Women at CIW

Upon arrival at CIW on the morning of the concert, prison security thoroughly inspected all musical instruments and cases, sheet music, folders, and equipment. No personal possessions (cell phones, cameras, keys, purses, wallets, etc.) were permitted inside the prison. Each musician was individually processed through a metal detector and then issued an identification tag.

The CIW staff and security personnel exhibited the highest level of professionalism and efficiency throughout the entire day.

The concert took place in the CIW auditorium. This modest brick building, adjacent to the prison's central quad, resembles a '50s-era school cafeteria (part auditorium, part cafeteria, part activity room). The entire concert band could not fit on the auditorium's small stage, so most of the musicians were seated on the main floor. (Anecdotally, despite the interior's austere appearance and its obvious lack of any frill, the acoustics were extraordinary.)

One-hundred inmates were permitted to attend the concert. This was designated as a privileged event for which an inmate earned a special "ducat" to attend.

I could not adequately express just how profound the concert experience was for all people there that day. The emotional response from the prisoners was equaled by the emotional response from the musicians.

Two days after the concert we received the following letter from the prisoners:

*Dear Dr. Stoffel
and Wind Ensemble,*

We cannot thank you enough for coming out here and presenting us with the kind gift of music. The introductions to familiar and not so familiar tunes were interesting and enhanced the beauty and/or fun of the song. The joy of music was reflected as each of the members introduced their instruments which lightened the atmosphere and gave us an opportunity for gaiety. Through the decades that some of us have been incarcerated, there has not been a classical music presentation given within the institution. Many of us didn't even know what the various

instruments were and this was a brand new introduction to the Arts. Finally, for a few hours we felt like human beings – giving us an escape from our daily lives here. We wish all of you a warm and loving holiday. We hope that you got as much out of the day as we did because odds are that this was a new experience for you too.

Thankfully,

- The Grateful Women of the California Institution for Women

A few weeks later the chaplain shared with us additional comments from individual prisoners:

"There is no joy, there is no beauty in a prison setting at Christmas, or ever. I was enthralled by the joy and beauty of your performance. Thank you."

"The experience awakened a light part of me that had been shut off. It made me feel as though, 'Everything will be alright.'"

"The CSUN Wind Ensemble's Christmas concert was spectacular! The musical performance they delivered came down from the heaven. The holy season is the most difficult for inmates to experience alone, without loved ones. The joy that the conductor and musicians brought to us, filled our hearts and distracted us from the pain of isolation... for just a little while, we didn't feel quite so forgotten."

"Utterly amazing and very valuable, it brought a nice slice of humanity to CIW."

"From the moment the music began I was transported away from prison walls and fences to a place where memories and possible futures reside. My heart was deeply touched."

Reactions from CSUN students were equally profound:

"Playing a concert of this nature was truly special and fulfilling in a way that I had not previously experienced. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to participate in something so special for both the audience and performers alike." - Josiah Morales, euphonium, senior, BM Performance.

"Well it was very hard to play the music without crying, knowing that some of these inmates have not been on the outside world for decades and seeing their reactions was by far a gift, one that reminds me of the gift I have to play music for any audience that is willing to listen. It was like they're watching a movie and we were able to see them live vicariously through that movie. The movie was us." - Jason Kennedy, oboe, junior, BM Performance.

"I have never felt the experience of sharing such an emotional musical event with so many people that I've never met before. You always had a sense of high expectation in the ensemble because everyone cared so much about making sure that the music was going to be performed at 200%." - Alphonso Johnson, string bass, senior, BA Music Education.

"Prisoners are not much different than us. Every one of us has made mistakes in our lives, they just happened to make bigger mistakes. Prisoners should be respected and treated humanely by the public. We simply showed them compassion the best way we could, through music." - Monica Long, senior, trumpet, BM Performance.

"After our performance one of the inmates walked up to the clarinet section and said, 'You know before you guys got here I had no hope. But after hearing you play I know that everything is going to be alright. I'm going to be okay.' As a whole, I came in expecting to make an impact on them, who knew that they'd end up making a life-long impact on me?" - Shanee Parker, senior, clarinet, BA Music Education /BM Performance.

The concert would never have been possible if not for the efforts and dedicated work of Dr. Maryloyola Yettke, the CIW Chaplain. She shared her thoughts about the concert in a letter:

When I received an e-mail from Dr. Stoffel offering to bring the CSUN's Wind Ensemble into the prison I was ecstatic. Every step of the way of the long (and sometimes laborious) security process was met with graciousness by him and his students. Their music transported all of us to a world where there are no limitations. Dr. Stoffel's introduction of the various instruments was a delightful educational experience for all. It was just plain fun.

The students were amazing! They had such a professional presence about them. The ensemble was culturally diverse which made a visual (and strong) statement about the ability of people working together. And, of course, music often has that ability.

A warden's schedule is exceptionally demanding as one might expect, but she came in on her day off (not that it is ever truly a day off), to attend the concert. Her presence elevated the significance of this first time ever event – something which did not go unnoticed by the inmates.

Now, I have a confession to make. I found myself watching the reactions of the inmates more than the ensemble.

These women, with whom I have worked extensively, were crying, smiling, and profoundly brought into the experience. I could see that for a brief moment in time they forgot that they were in prison. I knew that some of the women thought that they would never again see a live orchestra in their life times; they were enthralled.

I knew that some women had never experienced a concert in their lives and truly had no idea what to expect; they were captivated. Finally, the remarks I continue to receive after the event testify to its success. The deep-hearted thank you warmed my heart and made all the work, well worth it. I am fervently grateful to Dr. Stoffel and his students for their unselfish gift of giving of their time and talent!

*- M. Yettke,
Chaplain California Institution
for Women*

I also experienced the same phenomenon that Dr. Yettke described about forgetting that we were all in a prison. After being processed through security, the CSUN students and I waited in the CIW auditorium for nearly an hour before the concert began. I found myself frequently forgetting that we were actually in a prison. The prison's 1950s-era auditorium was in many ways identical to an auditorium found on the campus of a typical public school. In many ways the concert was as ordinary as any of the other outreach concerts that the CSUN Wind Ensemble gives every semester. I found it to be all



the more extraordinary that this prison concert was, at least for fleeting moments, rather ordinary.

But unquestionably, this was no ordinary performance. Immediately following the concert, the inmates were methodically processed through the auditorium exit. During those few minutes that it took for them to file out, a few women came for-

ward to express their gratitude directly to me and to the students. Among all of the inmates that I spoke with that day in December, I will remember one woman in particular. She shared with me that she has been incarcerated at CIW for more than 40 years. Our Christmas concert was the first time that she had heard a performance of live music.

Let me repeat: she had not heard live music performed in more than 40 years.

A few of the women also quietly shared personal anecdotes. One inmate wanted to me know that she had played oboe in her school band. Another let me know that she was once a university professor. I found great dignity in these brief conversations.

One woman expressed her gratitude by saying that the concert could have been twice as long and everyone would still be wanting more. "It wouldn't be possible for the concert to be too long," she proclaimed. And then with a lighthearted smile, she added, "We were a captive audience."

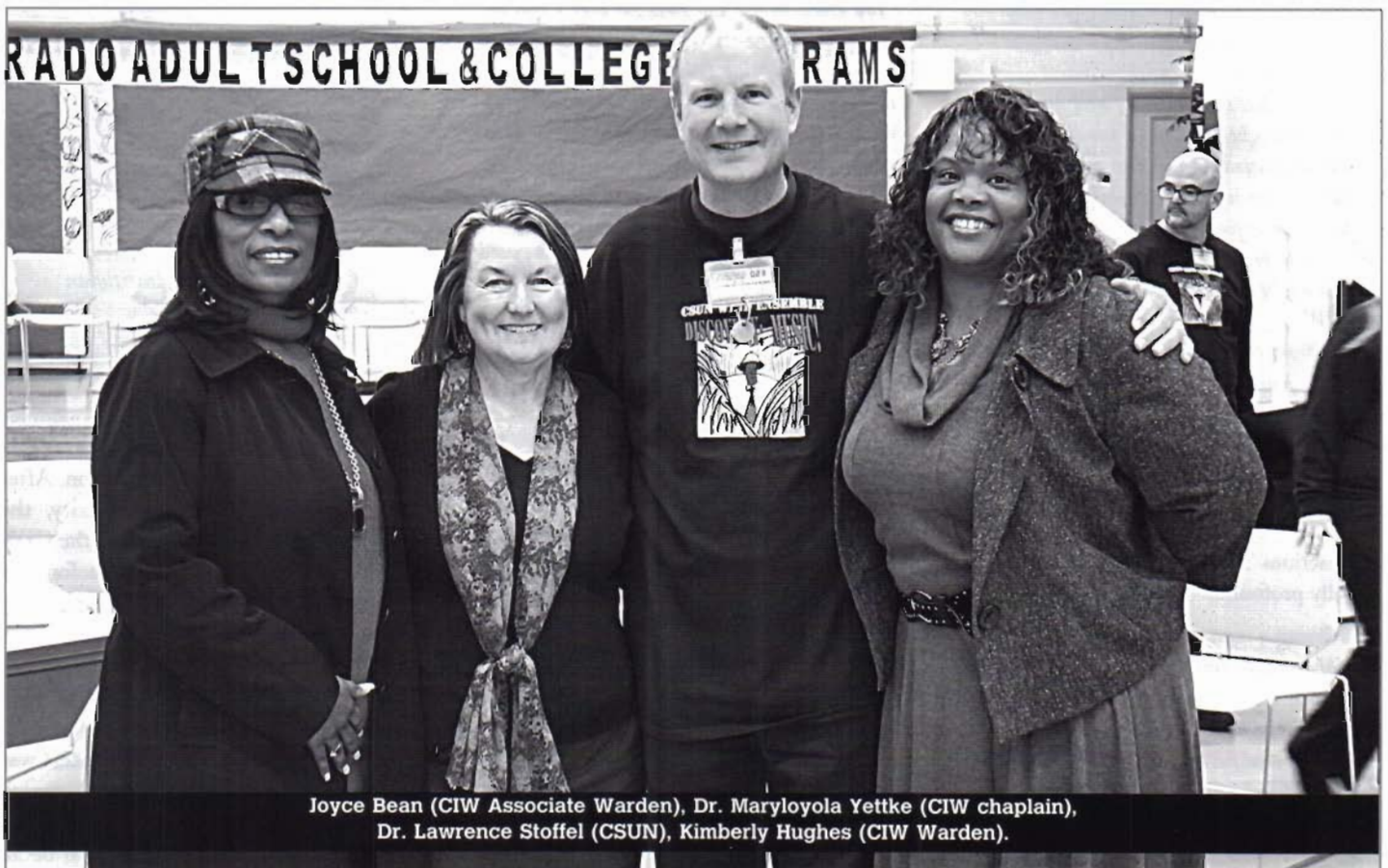


Some information contained in this article is quoted from these California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation websites:

www.cdcr.ca.gov/Facilities_Locator/CIW.html

www.insidecdcr.ca.gov/2013/12/university-concert-band-performs-for-ciw-inmates

Photo credits: Lt. Richard Montes, AA/PIO (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation)



Joyce Bean (CIW Associate Warden), Dr. Maryloyola Yettke (CIW chaplain), Dr. Lawrence Stoffel (CSUN), Kimberly Hughes (CIW Warden).