



Queens College Professor Maxine Fisher, who runs the Bach To School concert program which exposes local schoolchildren to classical music. Photo by Jeanne Noonan

Bringing Bach to the future

The kid made Maxine Fisher's day. This was last week, right after Fisher had mounted the second "Bach To School" concert, a program she created to introduce classical music to elementary school children.

The concert, at PS 128 in Middle Village, Queens, had ended and the children, second and third graders, had all returned to their classrooms.

Thomas Lee and his friends who make up the Queens Saxophone Quartet were packing up to go.

That's when the kid, who had ducked out of class and made his way back to the auditorium, walked up and asked Fisher the name of a piece of music he had particularly liked, the "Rhapsody for Saxophone Quartet" by American contemporary composer Eric Ewazen.

"I was thrilled!" Fisher said. "That's what it's all about!"

"I believe the future has to be cultivated. If we can get young people to listen to classical music, I believe they will like it."

Fisher, 64, is no musician, nor does she own a concert hall. She's a Forest Hills, Queens resident and Queens College adjunct professor of English who also holds an anthropology degree from the same school.

She just loves classical music and wants to make sure her love of Mozart, Beethoven and the like don't become relics of another age.

"I go to a lot of classical music concerts, and what I noticed recently was that there aren't many children in the audience," Fisher said. "I go on weekends, not during the week. I was thinking that probably nowadays it's quite difficult for parents to take their kids to hear live classical music in a concert hall.

"So I wondered what I could do to remedy that," she said. "I had this idea that maybe in a small way, I could bring live classical music to children directly in schools."

Fisher came by her love the classical way — her late mother, Shirley Fisher, would take her to classical concerts at City College's now-vanished Lewisohn Stadium, and to the old Metropolitan Opera anytime she could get away from the family store, Fisher's Men's Shop in Maspeth, Queens.

"The earliest music and I can recall hearing, my first lullaby, were arias from Madame Butterfly, because my mother had opera records," Fisher said. "She played them and when I was old enough to walk she took me to concerts to hear live music. She was a working mother and I didn't get to have her company exclusively often.

"She took me to an outdoor summer concert, where I first heard Tchaikovsky's Concerto No. 1, and absolutely fell in love with it."

Fisher went to PS 72 and MS 73, both in Maspeth; Newtown High School and then

Queens College, where she got that anthropology degree.

She returned to her alma mater in 1995 to help run the New York/Paris Exchange program, which at that time sent students and professors throughout the City University of New York system on semester- or year-long study programs at various colleges and universities in Paris.

The head of the program left, and Fisher took it over. Shortly after that, the head of the school's English Department came to Fisher with a complaint.

"The English department chairman came to me and said it was all very well and good for you to send my faculty to Paris, but who is going to teach my classes?"

"And in one of the early epiphanies of my life, I said I'll do it," she said. "I love literature, which is a real passion of mine. I've been doing it ever since."

Last Fall, Fisher approached Edward Smaldone, director of Queens Colleges' Aaron Copland School of Music, with her idea.

"I just wanted to get his feedback as to

whether this was something that was already being done by other organizations I might hook up with or what did he think of the idea," Fisher said. "He said, 'That's great! Let's do it!'"

"I have seen what Maxine does and the programs she puts on for these kids, and it is every bit as good as any program like it in the city," Smaldone said. "She does not dumb down the music."

Fisher said she had only two conditions for running the program; that the concerts be free to the schools and that the performers get paid.

The Bach to School name explains itself. Saxophone Quartet member Lee, 24, a Queens College graduate student, described the concerts as 'guided listening,' where musicians talk to the students about the music and cue them in on what passages or notes they might listen for.

"I even get to tell some of my jokes," Lee said.

The program has been such a success that Fisher said she has five additional concerts booked this year, including shows on March 30 at PS/IS 127 in East Elmhurst and April 20 at PS 49 in Middle Village.

"I feel like this is the mission of my life, because I love classical music and I don't want to see it die with the next generation," she said.

For more information or to support the program email Fisher at maxine.fisher@QC.cuny.edu.

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