

UPBEAT

Spicing Up Musical Brussels Sprouts: Serna Serves Viols to Schools

When Phillip W. Serna of Local 10-208 (Chicago, IL) was growing up in Texas, his older brother took him to a viola da gamba performance. He was immediately fascinated with the early Renaissance instrument. Serna, who already played the double bass and guitar, excitedly signed up for lessons.

Now Serna serves as the president of the Viola da Gamba Society Third Coast, the Chicago chapter of the Viola da Gamba Society of America. In 2006, he started the Viols in Our Schools Early Music Education Initiative, a community outreach program that aims to expose children to the unique instrument through performances and lecture-demonstrations of music from the Renaissance, Baroque, and early Classical periods. “A lot of people don’t hear pre-Baroque music before college,” he says. “It’s an obscure orbital for a lot of them.”

Serna says that kids are inquisitive when they first see the viol. “They ask, ‘What is that thing?’” Serna says. Different age groups ask different questions, although one of the most common he gets is: “Is that a cello? A guitar-cello?”

“They try to analyze it with instruments they know,” he says. “They try to create a label.” He recounts a time when a middle school student approached him. “He said, ‘I don’t know how to ask this—why does it sound fake?’” Serna recalls. “He was unsure how to ask how the instrument’s notes seem to sing into each other, the resonance so to speak. I found it extremely disarming, but I liked that it was so thought-provoking.”

Interactions like this are important, Serna says, because children are an audience that’s often alienated from the classical music community. “Symphony orchestras don’t always communicate to young people, which perpetuates an ivory tower mentality about classical music,” he says. “You have to communicate that you’re an average Joe, and that the people whose music you play were average, too. They were human beings, not just a bunch of powdered wig people.”

Serna considers the Federation important because of all the protections it offers musicians, especially in today’s rapidly changing musical landscape. Whenever digital media rights issues arise, he says, the AFM works to ensure musicians get the money they deserve from the works they produce.

“Nowhere else but the arts are people expected to do stuff pro bono,” Serna says. “I don’t make money on the outreach program, but it’s important enough that it needs to happen. To make a living is why I have all my other work.”

Serna stresses a need for public service, especially catering to youth. “We need to make the arts for young people attractive, hip, interesting—not at all off-putting,” he says. “It takes time to change people’s attitudes toward things. We need to package what we do better, to make it more accessible and interesting to people.”

One of the ways he proposes doing this is by tweaking the content of concert programs. “We need to sprinkle programs with pieces that are a draw for audiences,” he says, not just with what the orchestra or conductor wants.

He speaks of viol music in culinary terms, calling it “flavorful” and “sweet and sour,” and likens putting together a program to planning a meal, comparing more obscure pieces to vegetables that some people would rather avoid. His suggestion: “Try to put things around the Brussels sprouts but not make people know they’re eating it.” Likewise, an orchestra shouldn’t make its program too narrow or highbrow.

“You can only have so much steak before you’re like, ‘Okay, let’s have pizza,’” he says. “They never program concerts that way, like a meal, where you need salad, an entrée. [If it’s unbalanced,] some people would go, but for others, it would be like watching *The Lord of the Rings* 20 times straight.”

Ultimately, Serna thinks it’s important not only for young people, but the population in general, to be exposed to the arts. “It’s important to see people passionate about playing,” he says. “Art is almost a bad word, almost off-putting. It’s time to have the standard that art is not bad.”

This is what Serna is trying to advocate with the Viols in Our Schools program. “For me, it’s not about, ‘Oh look, what a guy, look what he’s doing,’ but, ‘Look at the thing he’s promoting.’ It’s not about self-glorification. It’s about gamba glorification,” he says with a laugh. He hopes to get more people involved with the program. “Otherwise,” he says, “it’s the Phil Serna Show.”

While Serna considers viola da gamba music to have different challenges than modern music, he sees this as an attraction. “Everyone needs a good challenge,” he says. “It keeps music fresh and interesting.”

To learn more about Viols in Our Schools, and to listen to viola da gamba podcasts, visit www.violsinourschools.org and www.thegambacast.org.



Photo by Jonnie Maunder Photography

Phillip W. Serna of Local 10-208 (Chicago, IL) started the Viols in Our Schools program, which exposes children to the Renaissance instrument viola da gamba.