

ALIAS Chamber Ensemble Changes the World One Note at a Time

Nashville's ALIAS

Chamber Ensemble began on a simple premise: professional musicians who wanted to perform chamber music on their own terms. Since then, the success of the Nashville group has snowballed into a top-performing—and socially conscious—musical group. After nine seasons, ALIAS has had 10 world premieres, earned a newly commissioned project, won four “Best of Nashville” awards from *The Nashville Scene*, and raised \$22,000 for local charities. Artistic director Zeneba Bowers is amazed at what ALIAS has done.

“It’s unusual for a group of this size and age to be doing projects of this magnitude—certainly unusual for a group that’s still volunteer,” Bowers of Local 257 (Nashville, TN) says. “In the beginning it sounded really crazy, but it’s working.”

In 2002, Bowers and her friends decided to create a performing group where they could play chamber music of their own choice. These musicians, all members of Local 257 (Nashville, TN) play professionally in the Nashville Symphony or teach at local universities. What separates ALIAS from other groups is its charitable aim. All of the money raised in ALIAS’s first three concerts goes straight to charity.

“This is a way that musicians can end up doing something socially positive for the community, in a way that’s meaningful to them,” Bowers says. “It’s how we can donate our services to Nashville.”

Since its inception, ALIAS has donated to different organizations such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Better Decisions, Nashville School for the Blind, and more. By finding groups who are deserving of extra help, but aren’t receiving enough money, Bowers says, the group helps charities reach a larger audience with exposure and donations. More importantly, ALIAS helps expose a larger audience to classical music. Bowers makes it a point to choose eclectic and diverse musical works, as well as host talk-backs with the audience to explain the complexities of a composition. She likens it to having an artist explain a painting in a museum.

“We really want to expand our audience to people who have never been to a performance before, and show them that you don’t have to have an understanding of music to attend,” Bowers says. “Music is something that everyone can participate in. It’s our job as musicians to encourage people to feel like this is their music.”

For a group of its size, ALIAS has commissioned a large number of compositions



Members of the ALIAS Chamber Ensemble. The ensemble donates money from its performances to different Nashville, Tennessee, charities.

by renowned musicians, such as Local 257 member and bassist Edgar Meyer, and Local 444 member and violinist Piotr Szewczyk. But ALIAS’ largest—and most rewarding—project has taken the group by surprise.

In 2007, ALIAS first performed music by composer Gabriela Lena Frank, who mixes her Latin-American roots with folklore and Western classical music. Since Bowers first discovered the music of Frank, the composer has become a Guggenheim Fellow and a Latin Grammy winner. Bowers began by putting out feelers about a commission with the renowned artist. “Gabriela is blowing up all the stereotypes of what a classical composer is,” Bowers said. “She is a fantastic composer whose music will stand the test of time—it’s complex but accessible.”

But commission projects, especially one with a famous composer like Frank, can be pricey—upwards of \$50,000. ALIAS’ budget was a mere \$8,000 at the time. Fortunately, two Vanderbilt University professors, Jonathan Neufeld and Jennifer Lena, came to the rescue; they wrote grants to the Metro Nashville and Tennessee Arts commissions and the National Endowment for the Arts and commissioned the project. The project then attracted the Schubert Club in Minnesota and the Frank commission became a reality.

And so *Hilos*, Frank’s eight-movement work for piano, violin, clarinet, and cello, was born. And the project just kept growing. Frank and

ALIAS opened the world premiere October 1, and will perform *Hilos* in November at the Schubert Club, a venue known for launching the careers of young musicians. Plus, ALIAS finished its first-ever recording of Frank’s works for Naxos American Classics label.

The project has also kept with ALIAS’ mission to give back to the community. The NEA-sponsored initiative, “Mestiza Music in Music City,” brought Hispanic music, including *Hilos*, into Nashville schools. Frank and ALIAS performed for different elementary and high schools to facilitate a bilingual discussion about culture in Nashville.

“We’re reaching out to the community musically to increase our audience, and make meaningful connections,” Bowers says. “We want to do things that are relevant to our community and our country.”

Without the support of the AFM and Local 257, ALIAS would not have been such a wild success in Nashville. “We have such a strong union here,” Bowers says. “Word of mouth through the union, to its membership, has been very helpful. Everyone is very supportive of each other.”

Union membership has also helped the group garner respect and fairness in compensation, Bowers said. “When we’re done with our three concerts, things beyond that need to be paid. Performing is a job, and it should be treated as such,” she says. “We try to mix in our volunteer efforts with our paid efforts.”