

'I miss my music so much'

When they came to Canada, they left their musical careers behind. But now, as ELISA BIRNBAUM reports, a new orchestra in Montreal is giving a group of immigrant virtuosos a second chance

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Joseph Milo is on a mission. For the past year, he has been organizing a multicultural orchestra in Montreal made up of professional musicians who have immigrated from around the world. The accomplished conductor, composer and pianist didn't even need to travel for inspiration. All he had to do was walk to the front door.

That's where he found himself one sunny afternoon, absorbed in conversation with his doorman. Mr. Milo was stunned to hear that this unassuming expatriate was once a cellist in a major Russian symphony orchestra.

At that very same spot, he discovered another musician.

This time, Mr. Milo was surprised by his pizza deliveryman who mentioned that he had been a violinist in a respected orchestra in Romania.

And so, Mr. Milo began to assemble his orchestra. Aptly named Musicians of the World Symphony Orchestra, the group comes from as far away as China, Russia, Romania, Korea and the Middle East. What brought these transplanted Montrealers together is a passion for music and the chance to play professionally again.

Like the doorman and pizza deliveryman, many of these international virtuosos had to sacrifice their careers upon emigrating. With only one professional symphony orchestra in Montreal and few other opportunities to pursue music, they took any job just to make ends meet. As a result, music was often put on the back burner.

Aside from the opportunity it will provide the musicians, Mr. Milo hopes the ensemble will help to bring orchestral music back to the city's neighbourhoods.

"One of our mandates is to bring the orchestra to the communities -- mostly the ones represented by the musicians -- for little or no cost," he says. "It's really an orchestra for the people."

The project is a welcome one for Gagik Avagyan. For eight years, the 33-year-old was first trombonist in one of the largest orchestras in Armenia's capital, Yerevan. After marrying a Montrealer six years ago, he left his job and followed his wife to the city. He spent two years studying French and then started pounding the pavement looking for work as a musician. The search is now dragging into its fourth year.

"It's been so very difficult," Mr. Avagyan says sadly. "I miss my music so much."

Four days a week, he works as the superintendent of a large hotel in downtown Montreal.

"I don't have a choice," he says. "I need to work, I can't stay home and do nothing. I need to make a living."

Mr. Avagyan hopes that his membership in the orchestra will bring him one step closer to re-establishing himself as a professional musician.

The project has also given him something beyond hope: the opportunity to connect with musicians from all over the world and to find common allies. "I now know others who are like me, who have a hard time finding jobs and are great musicians, but have to do something else," he says.

One such ally is violinist Venus Fu. Playing music since she was a five-year-old in Beijing, Ms. Fu eventually got a job in the Beijing Film Orchestra. She then headed over to Hong Kong to play in a prestigious symphony

orchestra for 10 years. When her husband was transferred to Montreal five years ago, she joined him. But the move was bittersweet.

"I sacrificed for my family, but any minute I would fly back if it wasn't for them," she says. "The first two years not working in music drove me crazy. My whole life I have never stopped playing my music; I belong to the stage."

For a city as cultured and as large as Montreal, Ms. Fu finds it puzzling there aren't more orchestras, operas and ballets. In Beijing and throughout Asia, she explains, most kids learn at least one instrument, with music schools, after-school programs and private tutors almost as popular as studies in math and science.

"Here people talk about hockey and sports; in Asia, we talk about music," she says.

Fellow orchestra member Anna Levitina can relate to Ms. Fu's situation. She moved to Canada 15 years ago from Belarus. She was a professional violinist in the capital city of Minsk; music and a rich cultural life had always figured prominently in her life. "It was another kind of life, another world. We heard concerts at least once or even twice a week, we went to exhibitions and shows."

Although today she is a piano and violin teacher, when Ms. Levitina first arrived in Montreal she had to work as a housekeeper and babysitter to make ends meet. Having an opportunity to perform serious music again and to be a part of a professional musical ensemble "is like a window to my previous life."

After securing the blessing and some initial funding from Montreal's municipal government, Mr. Milo has been busy auditioning, hiring and rehearsing. His orchestra now has 25 members and he is searching for more, hoping to establish a symphonic-sized group of 45 to 50 musicians in time for their first official concert in June.

Staying true to the orchestra's multicultural roots is one of Mr. Milo's main goals. He envisions performances in community centres, synagogues, churches and even local parks. Although the majority of pieces played will be classical, he plans to incorporate authentic instruments and music written by composers from countries representing the diversity of the group's musicians.

According to Ms. Fu, this project is exactly what she -- and the city -- needs. "I want a social life with more colour," she says emphatically.

"Music gives colour; education is a colour, science is another colour. We need more colour."

Elisa Birnbaum is a writer and producer in Toronto.