String theory: With cello choir, instructor helps students rekindle the joy in their music

Pandemic lethargy gives way to creativity for young artists.



Jaden Ouyang, an eighth-grader at St. Mark's School of Texas, performs with Texas Cellos.(Shelby Tauber / Special Contributor)

By Helen Bond

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Joseph Kuipers knows the unique power of the cello and how it can transform those who commit to learning to play it.

Drawn to the beauty of the string instrument's warm, rich tones that resemble the human voice, the cello player is a "little bit gregarious, loving of life, beauty, expression and energy," explains Kuipers, a virtuoso cellist, teacher and recording artist.

So, last September, when Kuipers eagerly began reconnecting with his students in person, he knew something was off.

"It just became really noticeable that there was this heavy, lethargic fog — a kind of dullness, basically, and people were slightly checking out," Kuipers recalls.

Members of Texas Cellos perform a dress rehearsal at the McKinney Cotton Mill, where they recently performed

their first live concert.(Shelby Tauber / Special Contributor)

Determined to return the spark to his young artists and their music, Kuipers pitched the notion of creating a student cello choir.

“You know sometimes you have an idea, and everybody just can’t quite understand or grasp it?” Kuipers says. “This one, everybody instantly said yes. There was no pushback whatsoever. I sensed a genuine hunger for it.”

Within a few weeks, Texas Cellos was born, along with an official mission to give back to the community by “inspiring and cultivating excellence in youth through music education, ensemble building and through performance opportunities.”

The group is made up of 28 young artists from across Dallas-Fort Worth, ranging from age 12 to a professional performer in his mid-20s. Since October, they’ve met regularly at the Music Institute of North Texas in Frisco, joined by their shared love for the cello.

Linda Chen goes over sheet music with Texas Cellos director Joseph Kuipers.(Shelby Tauber / Special Contributor)

“In that first rehearsal, I made a couple of friends, and we had lots of fun performing,” recalls 14-year-old Jaden Ouyang, an eighth-grader at St. Mark’s School of Texas. “Afterwards, I went to the car and told my mom, ‘That was the most fun I had playing the cello in a year.’ It was great.”

Jaden’s mom, Melody Ouyang, director of the Music Institute of North Texas, offered rehearsal space for Texas Cellos. She often stays to work while her son practices, taking in the sweet sounds from her nearby office.

“The cello is beautiful already, but if you multiply that by 28, the sound fills every single air particle with such warmth and joy. It’s just incredible,” says Ouyang.

For Kuipers, there have been moments of “wow” with Texas Cellos and a

reminder of the importance of making and listening to live music. Texas Cellos recently performed its first live, socially distanced concert at the Music@Mill Festival, organized by Kuipers at the McKinney Cotton Mill.

Texas Cellos is a group made up of 28 young artists from across North Texas, ranging from age 12 to a professional performer in his mid-20s.(Shelby Tauber / Special Contributor)

Plans for Texas Cellos include a concert at Moody Performance Hall and the launch of a summer institute with professional guest teachers — all in a welcoming place of friendship and excellence in cello.

“It’s all about that shared togetherness, where we learn to kind of overcome our own insecurities and strengths and weaknesses,” Kuipers says.

“And when we do that, all of a sudden, we become the best version of ourselves, we connect with others, and we sound great. Suddenly the music

works, and we're not forcing it. It just happens through focus, dedication and love."

Details

To learn more, visit texascellos.org.