

Decoda ensemble, inmates collaborate on music writing workshop

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BISHOPVILLE, S.C. – In some ways, the Lee Correctional Institution, the largest all-male maximum-security prison in South Carolina, is exactly as you might expect: barbed wire, tan jumpsuits and intense pat-downs at entry.

But take a moment to peer beyond the barriers, and you might be surprised to find a group of inmates tapping into their creative potential in a beautifully collaborative way.

Nearly 40 members of the prison's Better Living Incentive Community participated this week in an intensive, weeklong musical workshop with Decoda, a Carnegie Hall-affiliated chamber music ensemble.

The week culminates with a Saturday concert in the prison chapel, where the inmate musicians and Decoda perform for the larger incarcerated community, staff, officers and local and state officials.

This year's program was inspired by Vivaldi's "Four Seasons." Daily workshoping sessions began with a freestyle period when inmates could perform songs of any genre. Then they broke out into small groups, led by Decoda members, to work on individual songs centering on the seasons of life.

"Music is one of the only tools that exists that can supersede language barriers, personal barriers, cultural barriers, economic barriers," said Claire Bryant, a Decoda cellist and the director of the ensemble's criminal justice initiative.

Often, the groups create upwards of 20 or 30 songs and have to make cuts before the final performance, she said.

It's a lesson in compromise and decision making.

It's also an opportunity that few incarcerated people get — and it doesn't go unnoticed by the inmates.

"These guys are literally world-class musicians," said Rob, an inmate at Lee. "It doesn't get any better than this."

Rob leads a year-round music program at Lee, where he teaches other inmates to play instruments. He is a lifelong musician, an electric guitar, bass and mandolin player. Currently, he's learning to play the cello, an idea inspired by Bryant.

The workshop, now in its third year at Lee, promotes constructive behavior for the inmates. It allows them to work together and express themselves creatively.

And when the week is over, the cooperative spirit transfers back to the Better Living Incentive Community dorm, where Rob said inmates primarily leave their doors unlocked and solve problems by discussion.

Decoda, which is based in New York City, also hosts workshops at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in New York. The ensemble got involved with Lee through Bryant, who is originally from Camden.

The program's intention is to create new art in a synergistic atmosphere. It's not meant to be rehabilitative, Bryant said. That's just music's inherent nature.

Rob echoed her point, saying music gives the incarcerated men a sense of hope and self-worth.

"It reaches people on a level that a lot of things can't," he said. "It gives you a sense of accomplishment."

The criminal justice system is broken, Bryant said, and people are finally beginning to talk about it.

Programs like this one are often seen as extracurricular. But, Bryant said, it should be a vital part of the system, as the programs promote collaboration, expression and empowerment.

Approximately 95 percent of state prisoners will be released back into their communities at some point, according to data from the Justice Center.

"We need to think about what kind of experience they're having," Bryant said.

Want to hear Decoda play?

The group will be performing a Valentine's Day show in which it will play two songs from the inmate workshop.

IF YOU GO

>>WHAT: Decoda with the Danish String Quartet

>>WHERE: Fine Arts Center of Kershaw County

>>WHEN: 5 p.m. Sunday

>>ADMISSION: Tickets range from \$15 to \$35 and can be purchased at fineartscenter.org.

Hear More:

Decoda's website: <http://decodamusic.org/>

And the site where you can listen to music from a past workshop at Lee:

<https://soundcloud.com/washington-post-opinions>

More Information

Have an instrument you don't use anymore?

Email Claire@decodamusic.org to donate it to the prison.