

Child cellists perform at MFA as City Strings United celebrates five years



PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Elijah Scott, 6, adjusted his collar before playing.

By [Jeremy C. Fox](#)

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On Sunday afternoon, in the soaring atrium of the Museum of Fine Arts, children in white-and-black dress-up clothes sat in a semicircle, rehearsing bow

movements and finger positions as adults hurriedly arranged folding chairs and music stands.

After much bustle and a few spontaneous bars of “Hotel California,” the sound of tuning strings subsided, and 13 young cellists began to play.

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Accompanied by some of the professionals and Berklee College of Music students who help train them at City Strings United, the children played classical compositions, a Shaker hymn, Latin beats, and selections from “The Sound of Music.”

The public performance marked the fifth anniversary of City Strings United, a milestone that was never guaranteed.

City Strings is designed to provide skills, opportunities, and self-esteem to children who might otherwise not get the chance to learn an instrument. Its students are children of color, mostly from Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan, who pay only a \$25 registration fee.

The program survives on donations from supporters and from parents who can afford to give. Other parents donate time or provide transportation. Last year a popcorn sale brought in \$900.

Bithyah Israel, the organization's founder, said she wants to give the children the opportunity she had growing up in Southern California, when she received free lessons from a cellist in the San Diego Symphony and performed in youth orchestras.

"It made me feel like I was flying sometimes," Israel said, "and that's what I want the kids to get."

Jahsias Rivers of Norwood has taken lessons at City Strings since the beginning.

"As we go on and on, stuff gets harder and harder," said Rivers, 13. "But I like it like that."

Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury provides space for the program, and at first it was the only place the students performed, Rivers said. Public performances like Sunday's make him feel like he's starting to get famous, he said.

It's easy to see why. At the MFA, more than 100 people stopped chatting, eating, or looking at art and gathered in a silent semicircle to hear the children play.

The oldest student cellist was 14. The youngest, Elijah Scott of Mattapan, was just 6. He's been studying cello at City Strings since he turned 4.

"He really does love performing more than anything," said his mother, Elizabeth Scott. "He's always been into music. . . . Even when he was just 2 years old."

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