



American Composers Forum Washington DC Chapter

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THE COMMUNITY PARTNERS PROGRAM: “ANACOSTIA JOURNAL”

On April 26, 2003, Lauren Bernofsky's string quartet "Anacostia Journal" premiered at Bladensburg Waterfront Park, as part of the closing rally for the Anacostia Earth Day Cleanup. The performance acted as a finale for Bernofsky's *Community Partners* residency with the Earth Conservation Corps (ECC). The ECC is an AmeriCorps program providing young people from under-resourced communities with a chance to reclaim two of the country's most threatened resources: the environment and themselves.

As part of her residency, Bernofsky interviewed members of the ECC, who each devote a year to help to clean up and preserve the Anacostia and surrounding areas. Bernofsky used those interviews as source material for the quartet. The impact of this project may be illustrated best by the composer herself, who wrote the following summary of her experience:

"When I first met with the Earth Conservation Corps' Eagle Corps members, what struck me most was our vastly different backgrounds — I come from a relatively privileged background, having had the benefit of stable family and financial circumstances and born to two college graduates. The Corps members come from virtually the opposite background — they are the inner-city youth of Washington, DC, and I had been told that some had been homeless at one point or another, most didn't have the benefit of a stable family, all had come from inner-city schools, none certainly having had the opportunity to take private instrumental lessons. But, most of all, they were people who, as it was explained to me, had never been given any indication that they were special as individuals, that what they did and thought counted for something in the world.

"The first day I visited, I spoke a little bit about who I was and what I did, and then I described my project, that I was going to interview each of them and then use their ideas as the basis for a musical composition. Over the course of weeks of my residency, I got to speak with each of them individually about what it was that they did with the Earth Conservation Corps and what their thoughts and feelings were about issues regarding the nature they encountered. I was, in many cases, surprised and deeply impressed with the depth of understanding, degree of imagination, and, more than anything else, the humanity that I saw in these people. And they taught me so much about nature and conservation! I feel that they brought to me as much as I brought to them, during my project.

"I wrote down all their thoughts and ideas into a journal, and I decided to title my piece "Anacostia Journal" as a result. ("Anacostia" is the name of the



Volunteers and staff of the Earth Conservation Corps, joined by the Vesalius Quartet and composer, Lauren Bernofsky.

river around which the Earth Conservation Corps Eagle Corps is based.) I intended the music I would write about these thoughts and ideas to be appropriate for an outdoor setting and accessible enough to people who were not a "new music" audience, while at the same time being artistically satisfying to me. I chose the format of multiple shorter movements that were "character pieces" which were more about creating a mood or evoking a specific aspect of nature, than being about motivic/thematic development.

"The most gratifying part of my residency came the day I returned with my finished piece. I had fortunately been able to get a work-in-progress recording, and I brought along my violin to illustrate specific examples of how I took an idea and represented it in music. I could see that they "got" my music! They really came alive, suddenly fully understanding what the project was about. They seemed excited and flattered that their ideas counted enough to have been the basis of a string quartet, but they also seemed to enjoy the music itself. I could tell that they listened intently as the music played, and at some points many of them tapped their feet along to the music or they began excitedly pointing out certain things like "That's the part that sounds like the ducks talking!" or "That reminds me of when we were in the River and Tanocka fell right in!"

"The day of the premiere proved also to be a very rewarding experience, I would like to think, for all involved. Before the quartet played, a different ECC member got up and introduced each movement. They all spoke so eloquently, and what they said was so heartfelt, thoughtful, and revealing of a deep and passionate dedication to the conservation



The Vesalius Quartet performing the world premiere of "Anacostia Journal."



Lauren Bernofsky introduces "Anacostia Journal" at the world premiere performance.



ECC volunteer, Tendani Mpulubusi, introduces one movement of "Anacostia Journal."

effort. The cellist from the quartet later commented that he was nearly moved to tears by their comments. One of the ECC members, in his introduction, spoke of how he had never met a composer before and listened to classical music, but now he had a new realization about this whole world, which has changed him as a person.

"Composers always like getting money for what they do, but I have to say that the thanks I got from the ECC members at the end was the best payment I could ever receive! The performance itself was one of the best I've ever had of one of my works. The Vesalius String Quartet had had numerous rehearsals, because they wanted to, and they paid such loving attention to even the smallest of details that, even outside in not the best conditions, they gave a stunning performance of my piece, beautifully bringing out the character of each movement beyond my wildest expectations.

"Several people commented to me, after the performance, about how the audience was very much attuned to the music going on, how carefully they listened, and how they reacted after each movement. Many people came up to me afterward to thank me for the music, and one of the warmest congratulations came from the Mayor of Washington, D.C., himself.

"I had a great time doing this residency, and now I have a string quartet that I'm very pleased with and which I am proud to have as part of my catalog of works. The piece is already taking on a "life of its own": the quartet that premiered it has scheduled an additional three performances of the piece on formal concerts in Baltimore.



Anthony Williams, Mayor of Washington, DC, congratulates ECC members, the performers, and the composer following the premiere.

Community Partners engages professional musicians, community-based organizations and the people they serve in projects that celebrate heritages, explore community concerns and bring neighborhoods together through music. Through *Community Partners*, we create long-term composer residencies designed to make music a part of everyday life in DC's diverse neighborhoods.