

# T H E L I S T E



The String Queens, from left to right: Kendall Isadore, Élise Sharp, and Dawn Johnson.

# R T O F N I N G

## How The String Queens Came to LOH and Taught Us All a Thing or Two

*By Mike Hannigan*

“Whoa, I’ve never been in here before.” It was a first grader, maybe second, walking down the left center aisle of Lebanon Opera House, the room fully opening up as the balcony receded overhead. The space was in showroom condition, newly renovated. Inside, the bright colors of winter jackets and knit hats mixed into the mad chaos of students and their shepherds filing in.

Outside, a steady snow fell, as it would for the next two days – a late-winter monkey wrench in a carefully planned week of performances, teaching, camaraderie, and improvisation.

Minutes ago, the theater had been quiet and empty, and now it was full, the flat-nosed yellow buses having delivered their contents outside 51 North Park Street. It’s all a part of LOH’s Youth Education Series.



The String Queens and Tour Group on the final night of performances.

On stage, beneath the glow of purple spotlights, sat three empty chairs and music stands, flanked by a dozen more, soon to be filled by The String Queens and, later, some eager Upper Valley Music Center (UVMC) students, aka Tour Group.

Joe Clifford, LOH’s executive director, strolled up onto the stage. “Good morning,” he said to the assembled crowd.

“Good!!!! Morning!!!!!!!” the audience roared back. Excitement was high, but I still don’t think we fully realized what we were about to experience.

To call The String Queens a “string trio” is technically accurate, in the sense that calling Tom Brady a “football player” isn’t wrong either. It just sells reality a bit short for what these women bring to the stage. And this isn’t even their day job. All three are full-time educators, as well as funky string players.

“There are not too many people who can be both touring artists and middle or primary school teachers at the same time – it’s a pretty special combination,” says Ben Van Vliet, executive director of UVMC. “They’re obviously consummate musicians who play

at the highest levels. They really exude enthusiasm and warmth and love for working with students. Great educators see the person in front of them, first and foremost, and then can form a relationship and develop trust. Everything flows from there.”

The String Queens’ residency is essential to LOH’s mission of connecting artists and audiences – and is the culmination of months of planning and fundraising. The Mockingbird Foundation helped to make it happen with a generous grant, along with support from the Red River Charitable Foundation, the Hypertherm Associates HOPE Foundation, and the Couch Family Foundation. UVMC brought musicians and educators. Upper Valley schools supplied the audience for the first show. Residents of The Woodlands, an independent senior living community, welcomed the trio for an intimate recital. And the entire community turned out for a free performance on Thursday night, the capper to the whole affair.

“This is the first time we’ve funded a residency program,” said Colleen Heller from the Mockingbird Foundation. “But the tie to music education and the connection with youth and community was where we really saw a good fit.”

Energy builds as the musicians play off each other.



The Woodlands residents soak in an intimate performance.

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Violinist Dawn Johnson and Tour Group members during rehearsals at Lebanon's First Congregational Church.



Tour Group violinist Leigh Eggleton during rehearsals.



A young fan gets up close and personal.

“That’s what it’s all about: listening. It’s the most selfless thing we can do. It’s the hardest thing, which is why it’s so hard to teach. It means you have to get out of your own head and listen to what someone else is saying.”

For LOH, the residency was a chance to focus on contact and context – getting students and educators close to the musicians, with The String Queens teaching the art of performance in an intense period. Beyond just playing the notes, they taught students how to perform as an ensemble and entertain an audience – a large one at that.

“In the Upper Valley, we have this ethos about discovery and exploration. It’s not just a passive experience of being an arts patron,” said Joe Clifford from LOH. “We’re a relatively small place, so you can go deep with artists, and The String Queens residency is a great example of that. They came into contact with more than a thousand people over the course of three days here. The UVMC kids had an evening rehearsal and two performances. It’s unparalleled, the kind of contact you can get in a community like this.

“It’s also really interesting to just understand that artists are people, creating in a contemporary world. So, what drives them to make the work they do? For a lot of people, it’s just understanding that you can have an actual active career in the arts.”

“When we first heard them in rehearsal, I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, they’re very dynamic people,’” said Leigh Eggleton, who plays violin in Tour Group. “As we were rehearsing, it was clear they were just going with how they felt at the moment.

“Normally we get our music months before and we rehearse and rehearse, and it all culminates in this one performance, but this was very much like the work was doing the performance, making it all come out on stage.”

Nathaniel Picconi-Eakin, Tour Group’s lead violinist, saw something similar. “I wasn’t expecting as much engagement with the audience,” he said. “It felt like everybody was part of the music in the entire hall.”

“Even the teachers were clapping and dancing,” said Chip Silver, one of the cellists. “It just shows the connections that music has, because I never would’ve met them if I didn’t do music. To see the web that music can create and bring us all together, and to learn about different parts of the world and different instruments, is just so amazing.”

“It all comes back to music and making it with other people,” said Ben from UVMC. “There’s something that just goes beyond spoken language for me. That experience of being next to somebody and creating sound, creating meaning, creating an experience together. That kind of thing has been really special to me.”

“I met my people when I met Dawn and Élise because all these barriers, they were just down,” said violinist Kendall Isadore, as The String Queens

sat for an interview in LOH's green room. "We could just be free to express ourselves. You can hear the difference between people who play expressively and those who don't. You can feel the difference."

Collaboration is a natural state for The String Queens, even in an interview – listening, building on one another's points, responding, and challenging.

"It's something we were working on with the students this week," said violist Dawn Johnson. "Yes, we see notes on a page and we will play music with fidelity. But you also have to inject your own personality. Michael Jackson's 'Billie Jean' is not going to come alive with just what you see on the page, so we have to convey lyrics and ad libs and all of these extra musical moments. Sometimes you have to break away from the traditional mold of playing your instrument – all those little nuances and nuggets in our arrangements help it really come alive."

"We make up our own rules," said cellist Élise Sharp. "Number one is you have to feel the music however you express it, you feel it, and you move to it. Even the kids today, we didn't prompt them. They just started clapping and they were in. That's what we do as musicians. You feel the music, you play what you feel, and you give that to your audience."



Violinist Nathaniel Picconi-Eakin

All three String Queens are super emotive on stage. Kendall's face is expressive with every note. Dawn is often singing along, pointing the mic out into the audience, imploring them to join in. And Élise's pose on the cello is hard to miss: head proudly tilted back, eyes often closed. You can just see how much she feels what she's doing – playing, listening, soaking it all in. Members of Tour Group saw it up close and personal.

"Dawn was the closest to me," said Chip. "We had moments where we were just having eye contact and playing and going back and forth; it was having a conversation with the instruments. We had an hour to rehearse with them in person before this, and to be able to make that kind of connection on stage is just so amazing."

Later, The String Queens shared the secret to it all.

"Listening is the most essential thing," said Dawn. "In personal relationships, in music, in life."

"That's what it's all about: listening," said Élise. "It's the most selfless thing we can do. It's the hardest thing, which is why it's so hard to teach. It means you have to get out of your own head and listen to what someone else is saying."

"I just got goosebumps when you said that," said Dawn when asked whether she saw the light go on for any of the UVMC students this week. "The first person I thought about was Nathaniel – his passion, the leadership, the technical facility – all those things. He was such a sponge. He feels music so deeply. When you have somebody like that, it's infectious; it's going to spread around the whole ensemble. I saw him over there tapping on his leg the whole time. Seeing that energized me. We're at the end of the concert, we're tired. But when you see him and then you see Chip leading the cello section. Then I actually hear the sound grow in my ear. They're understanding things on the fly that some professionals can't even understand because they're right there in the music with us, being open. I would see smiles go back and forth. I was like, 'There's that joy. There it is.'

"I love when I see a spark, a joy, a passion, a kid who does everything right. That time we spent with them today made everything kind of feel right in the world, even if it was just for a couple of minutes."



Violist Dawn Johnson demonstrates to students during rehearsal.





Getting into the swing of "Billie Jean."



Proud parents out in the audience.



Cellist Chip Silver on stage at LOH.

“You go to Lebanon Opera House, and it communicates this is a special something that’s about to happen. For the audience and the performers. You look out and see all those seats, it impresses upon you the magnitude of what could happen.”

On the last night of performances, the trio play a free show at Lebanon Opera House as snow continues to fall outside, a final special experience for Tour Group and the whole community.

“You go to the Opera House, and it communicates this is a special something that’s about to happen,” says Ben from UVMC. “For the audience and the performers. You look out and see all those seats, it impresses upon you the magnitude of what could happen. Also, you feel like you’re being taken care of – this is a place where you might see a professional artist. It’s an honor to be given the opportunity to be on that stage, that somebody has deemed you worthy to be there.”

Out come The String Queens – Kendall is decked out in yellow. Élise shines with red sparkles. And Dawn is rocking a royal blue number.

“We’re so grateful to UVMC and their educators,” says Kendall from the stage between songs. “They’ve made it possible for young people to have access to not just any music programs, but quality music programs. This is not the norm, y’all, when you look across the country. It’s sad to say, but it’s true. So when we encounter a community like this where the arts are pushed to the forefront, because of people like you who buy the tickets or support the causes or donate, it matters.”

Eventually, Tour Group joins them on stage. Yesterday, when the students started playing, it sounded tentative. That apprehension is gone tonight. Everyone is egging the others on, smiles and eye contact darting back and forth across the stage. Tour Group has become a real group of performers (and not just musicians) over the course of this week – it’s impossible to miss.

Full of confidence, they dive into “Billie Jean” for the second time in two days. Out in the seats, people are standing up and dancing. Everyone in the room is feeling the moment.

“Shout out to all of you,” says Dawn, as she grabs the mic in the waning moments to address the parents of Tour Group directly. “We get to work with young people all over the country, and I don’t think we’ve ever worked with a group of people that have been so receptive to feedback, who have been so kind, so disciplined in their practice. That’s a testament to the work that all of you are doing at home. We thank you. We support you. Please continue doing all the things that you are doing.”

Later in the lobby, The String Queens pull up a table to sign merch and pose for selfies.

“I love your outfits. Where do you get them?” asks a fifth-grade cello student as she poses with the trio.

The String Queens and Tour Group pose on stage after the show.



“You guys are wonderful,” says another young cello player. “Do you have any tips on getting my pizzicato better?”

A middle school teacher comes up to thank them. “Your energy is where it’s at.” She introduces her daughter, a young flute player named Azalea. “Oh, that’s my favorite flower,” says Élise.

A boy named Brody comes in giving double high-fives and posing for pictures.

A young percussionist named Giovanni, maybe seeing himself in The String Queens, turns to leave with his mom, big smiles on both faces.

Nathaniel stops by to check in one last time. “‘Billie Jean’ is one of my favorite pieces I’ve ever played,” he says through a huge grin. The String Queens invite him to stay in touch and share his work, and he mentions that he’ll be in D.C. this summer, where the band is based.

Finally, Nathaniel’s mom comes up to say hi. “When he got off that first Zoom call with you, he said, ‘Mom, that’s the music I want to perform! Did you know that none of their concerts are ever the same?!?’” she says. “Thank you,” she adds quietly, smiling at the band.

And, really, maybe that’s all we ever need to believe – that our dreams aren’t pipe dreams, but instead are something that can actually happen: Meeting people who are doing something awesome that once seemed impossible. Setting foot on a professional stage, where people support you and make your art possible. Working with teachers who not only know the material but care about you as a person. And living in a region that includes a nonprofit opera house designed to bring people together and make every day better.

Will the Tour Group kids go on to professional music careers? That’s probably the wrong way to judge the value of what happened at LOH this week. But I wouldn’t bet against them either.