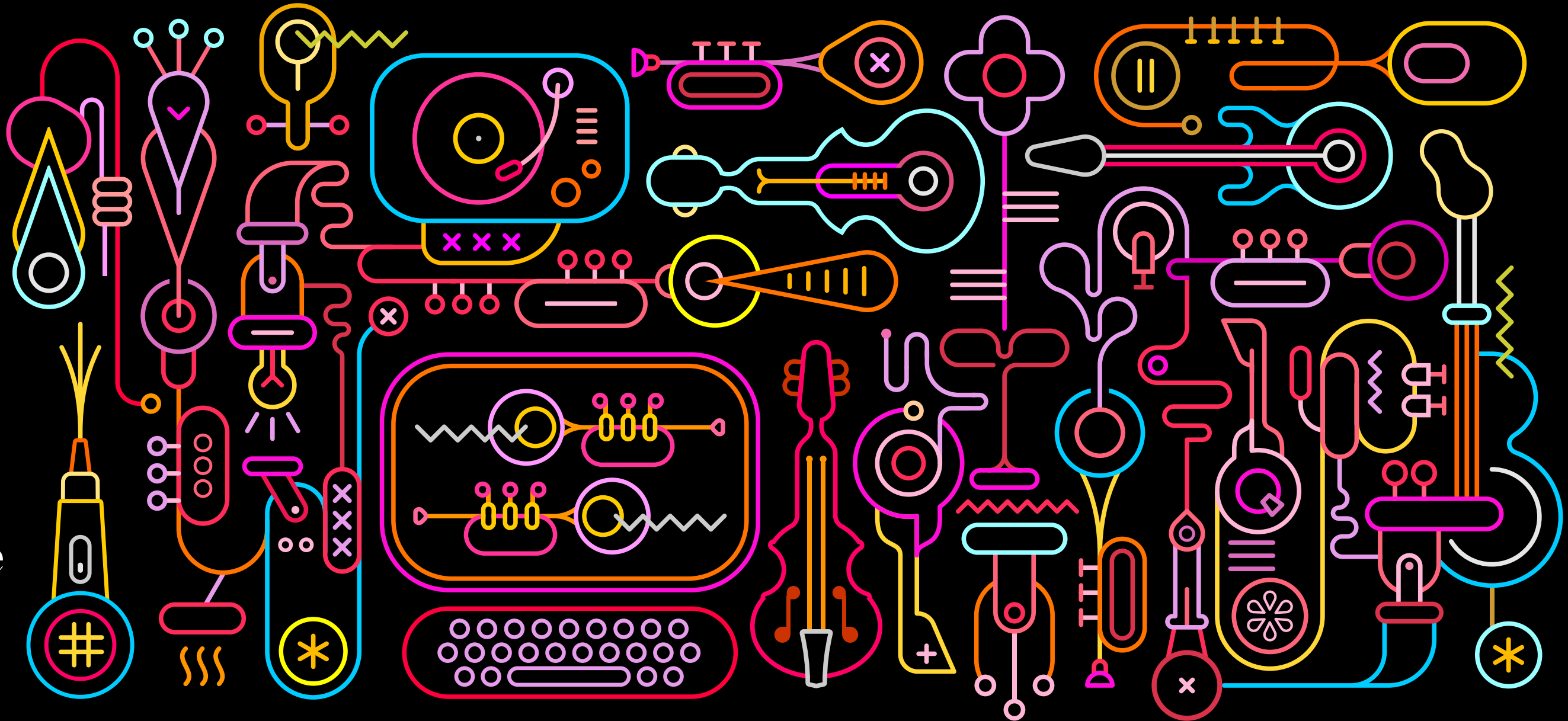


Philly Students Master Sonatas and Concertos for Uplifting Experience



Mitchell Bach W'68, L'71 has always been a loyal viewer of *60 Minutes*. But the show on April 13, 2008 was more than a typical episode. "I was mesmerized by it, and it really had an amazing effect on me," Bach recalls.

It showcased the success of a large-scale project in Venezuela called El Sistema, which teaches impoverished children how to play musical instruments as a means of social change—improving education, combating poverty and reducing crime. The story featured Gustavo Dudamel, the renowned conductor of

the Los Angeles Philharmonic who is an alumnus of the program.

"I was energized by what I had seen," said Bach. "It resonated with me in an amazing way. I could relate to it perhaps, but mostly I believed what they were saying was possible. And if it was possible, I wanted to be a part of it. What better way to help kids trapped in a cycle of poverty?"

Brimming with inspiration, he worked with Curtis Institute graduate Stanford Thompson and Carole Haas Gravagno to form what is today Play On, Philly!, a nonprofit that teaches city kids of all ages how to play classical music. Play On, Philly! instructs 325

students from three parochial schools and a charter school. They engage in an intensive, 15-hour-per-week after-school program.

"The kids are really enthusiastic, and they've become very proud of what they're accomplishing," said Bach, who sits on the organization's board. "I get the sense they've never experienced that self-pride before."

Play On, Philly! has compiled data that points to its success. Since its establishment in 2011, its leaders have been diligent in working with independent consultants to test the students and track their development and academic improvement.

The studies show students score 10 points higher on standardized tests than their peers, score higher on English and math tests, exhibit more determination and demonstrate better studying skills.

"It's kind of like re-wiring their brains—they've become far more disciplined, far more focused, and have become more attuned to what teachers are trying to teach during the day in academic classes," Bach said.

He said he'd like to see the program reach more students in Philadelphia public schools, but that the most pressing goal is working to keep the current program going.

Bach, a member at Eckert Seamans who focuses on commercial litigation, dispute resolution and mediation, grew up in the suburbs of New York but came to understand the plight of the poor while living in West Philadelphia as an undergraduate. During that period, he taught bookkeeping and got close to inmates at the Eastern State Penitentiary. Troubled by what he perceived as inequities in the criminal justice system, he decided to forgo a career in accounting in favor of law school.

"This is a really big problem, this cycle of poverty," Bach said. "Kids get into trouble after school and have nowhere to go, and it's like a cycle that can't be broken."

Until you start teaching them how to play classical music.

In awe that an idea sparked from *60 Minutes* came to fruition in Philadelphia, Bach said he's proud of what Play On, Philly!'s dedicated teachers and leaders have accomplished. He's also proud of the kids, who have performed multiple times at the Kimmel Center with the Philadelphia Orchestra.

"They're being introduced to all forms of classical music, and they seem to love it," Bach said. "Most of them had no exposure to it at all. It is pretty amazing, isn't it?"