

What does a mother's love sound like? Seattle Symphony's Lullaby Project finds out.

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May 10, 2019 at 6:00 am Updated May 11, 2019 at 12:50 pm



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Special to The Seattle Times

On a recent spring morning, Shawna Percival wheels her double stroller onto the stage of Benaroya Hall, home of the Seattle Symphony. She takes her girls with her everywhere when she's not at work. Shifting blankets and diaper bags, Percival removes the babies from their stroller, then takes a seat facing three musicians on stage, a baby in each arm.

Percival will not be playing an instrument. And while several other people are also there to listen, Percival's opinion is the one that matters. When she's ready, the musicians start to play the beginning strains of a **lullaby** that Percival wrote for her 2-month-old twins.

They are recording the song as part of the **Lullaby** Project, in which parents experiencing homelessness work with Symphony musicians and graduate students from Seattle Pacific University's music-therapy program to compose lullabies for their children. It's the sixth year for this collaboration between Seattle Symphony and Mary's Place, King County's largest emergency shelter provider for families.

The songs will be performed by Seattle Symphony musicians at a free public concert at Benaroya Hall on Mother's Day, May 12.

"I thought it would be really cool for them to have their own [lullaby](#), you know what I mean?" says Percival, one of this year's participants, after the recording session. "It's a little extra that mommy can do for them. I like to do what I can for them."



Shawna Percival, with her twins Vivian and Jayden, listens to the [lullaby](#) she worked on being performed by Seattle Symphony musicians Brittany Breedon, second violin; Valerie Muzzolini,... (Mike Siegel / The Seattle Times) More

Creating lullabies

The [Lullaby](#) Project began at New York's Carnegie Hall in 2011, pairing parents with professional artists to write and record personal lullabies for their babies. Seattle Symphony became one of the program's first national partners in 2013.

"For us it's like, how can we use the things that we're good at to help others?" said Amy Heald, collaborative learning manager at Seattle Symphony. "We can go and we can help people express themselves through song and through writing and there are multiple studies on how songwriting can be therapeutic and be helpful for people who are experiencing hardships."

Mary's Place — with whom the Symphony had partnered since 2011 on a program to provide tickets for people who otherwise could not access classical music performances — was "immediately excited to be part of this project," Heald said.

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The [Lullaby](#) Project involves several steps: a creative workshop in which participants from Mary's Place meet with Symphony musicians (who had been provided training on collaborative composition by the SPU music-therapy graduate students); professional arrangement and recording of the lullabies; a sharing session where the participants hear the final lullabies; and a public performance of the music.

This year, the first step — a daylong creative workshop — took place on Feb. 2 at Mary's Place in Burien. Stephanie VanderVelden, health-services program manager for Mary's Place, said families at the Burien center were invited to participate, and ultimately, four mothers and three children did. This is the first year that children staying at the shelter joined the musicians to write their own songs, said VanderVelden. "It just kind of happened organically that day. The kids got really interested hearing the music and seeing the musicians." None of the children who joined the [Lullaby](#) Project had parents who were participating, she added.

Each participant joined a team with one musician and one graduate student. Through discussions and guided exercises, the residents wrote the lyrics and selected the instruments for their lullabies. Based on their input, the musicians developed melodies. By the end of the day, they had written a song together. One child wrote a song about playing with a staff member at Mary's Place. Two siblings each wrote a song for their mother. One of the moms, whose own mother had recently passed away, also wrote about her mother. The other three songs were dedicated to children from 2 months to 16 years old.

VanderVelden said the opportunity to celebrate their families "really shows in the songs that the moms and the kids have written. Beyond the challenges they are experiencing, there is so much love and connection and pride that these families still carry."

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The lyrics, notes and cellphone recordings from the workshop were then given to arrangers at the Symphony, who prepared sheet music for the selected instruments. The Symphony's sound engineer recorded the final songs at Benaroya Hall with Symphony musicians.

Sometimes, like Percival, the workshop participants were able to attend the recording session, but usually they hear the final lullabies for the first time at a sharing session where they receive a CD, said Heald. "We'll listen to the final cuts for the first time so everyone can hear the final product together and reflect on ... the journey that everybody went through in creating these lullabies together."

Sharing lullabies

Percival, the mother of the 2-month-old twins, said she first came to Mary's Place six months ago.

REACH, a branch of Evergreen Treatment Services that provides recovery and social services to adults living outside, "was the initial ones that found me on the streets," she said. "I was living under a bridge, six months pregnant, and I didn't care because I was getting high all the time. And then they asked me if I wanted help, and for the first time in a very long time I said, 'Yes, I will take help.' The first thing they did was take me to Mary's Place, and I've been sober ever since."

She learned about the [Lullaby](#) Project while she and her twins, Jayden and Vivian, were living at Mary's Place's [new family shelter](#) in Burien. About a week before the [Lullaby](#) Project workshop, VanderVelden told her about the project and suggested she participate.

Percival didn't hesitate to take part, having played harp and violin when she was growing up. Those were the instruments she wanted to have in her song.

But, ultimately, she said, her babies were her only inspiration for her [lullaby](#), which devotes a verse to each of the twins. With her musician team, "we talked about the different things about the girls," she said.



Shawna Percival lifts up her daughter, Vivian, after listening to the [lullaby](#) she wrote performed and recorded by members of the Seattle Symphony at Benaroya Hall. (Mike Siegel / The Seattle Times)

Those conversations were the basis for the lyrics. Seattle Symphony piccolo player Zart Dombourian-Eby, who was on Percival's songwriting team, said they "took her words and we'd repeat the words and kind of get them into a singsongy rhythm, and then you

kind of add a melody to that and it kind of evolves.”

The melodies were also inspired by Percival's descriptions of her daughters.

“She was already seeing, at a very early age, the twins were very different in personality,” said Dombourian-Eby. “One of them's her rock star, and so that one was kind of rock-sounding, so their different personalities were reflected in the music.” The music for chill rock star Jayden is all strings, while spunky Vivian gets a percussive beat tapped on the body of the harp.

The completed songs were recorded on April 22, a significant day for Percival. “I am six months sober today,” she said backstage after the recording session.

Since arriving at Mary's Place, Percival has gotten treatment for addiction and found a job at Safeway. She now gets to see her sons, ages 8 and 10, who live with her ex-husband, on the weekends. Shortly after the February [Lullaby](#) Project workshop, she moved out of Mary's Place and into a house share.

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Percival is quick to credit the numerous organizations that helped her — REACH, Mary's Place and Union Gospel Mission, which gave her bus tickets when she was having a hard time getting to her appointments. “I don't think people get just how much they [these programs] do help,” Percival said. “Granted, it couldn't have worked if I wasn't willing, but these programs need to be there for people that are willing. Because I couldn't have done it on my own. You know what I mean? I had to have that support, I needed that. And now I live in a house, I'm employed, my babies are healthy and happy.”

Having played classical instruments for 10 years herself, Percival said she knew how her song was going to sound when performed, so it wasn't a surprise. But still: “It was awesome.” As she heard her [lullaby](#) being played by musicians on that day, her attention was on the twins. “I could tell that they recognized their names!” she said.

(Listen to Percival's [lullaby](#) for her babies):

Now, she's looking forward to Mother's Day, when the Symphony will host the public performance — an opportunity for the mothers and children to share the lullabies they've created with their families and friends.

“The Mother's Day concert is just amazing. It's so moving. I remember talking to the moms afterwards last time and they were really proud of what they had done and really felt a sense of accomplishment. I think we all felt that,” said Dombourian-Eby.

Percival plans to sit up front at that concert with her twins, her mother and the other [Lullaby](#) Project families. Like the other moms, she might say a few words before her song is performed, or she might simply enjoy the music as her photo is shown on a big screen above the stage. The choice will be hers on Mother's Day.

The [Lullaby](#) Project “shows the kids that they are special, that they matter,” said Percival. “I'm just looking forward to the concert. That will be cool to hear with all the other moms. And I'm really excited to have my mom listen to it.”

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[Lullaby](#) Project Celebration Concert, 11 a.m. Sunday, May 12; Octave 9: Raisbeck Music Center at Benaroya Hall, [200 University Street](#), Seattle; free but no tickets available as of publication; call box office (206-215-4700) or check website ([seattlesymphony.org](#)) for updates on ticket availability.

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