



Illinois Humanities | August 2020

GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT

Three Questions: Q&A with Melissa Ngan, founding executive director, Fifth House Ensemble



The Illinois Humanities Spotlight

Bi-monthly Illinois Humanities highlights the work of our Community Grants program partners through our “Grantee Spotlight.” It shines the light on our grantee partner’s work, offering details about the organization and the funded project, as well as a Q&A with a team member at the organization. More: ILHumanities.org/Spotlight

Project

“Deep Listening” and Graphic Score Composition at the JTDC

Location

Chicago, IL

Organization

Founded in 2005, Fifth House Ensemble (5HE) taps the collaborative spirit of chamber music to create engaging performances and interactive educational programs, forging meaningful partnerships with unexpected venues, artists of other disciplines, educational institutions, and audiences of every type.



Project Funded by Illinois Humanities

5HE has been in residence for six years at the JDTC, running arts-integrated music composition residency activities within two strands: 16 classroom visits to the Nancy B. Jefferson Alternative School and a collaboration with Storycatchers Theatre’s 24-week residency program. Evaluated through a research partnership with Loyola University, these activities impact participants’ personal agency, empowerment, collective decision making, and creativity through the creation of graphic and text score compositions rooted in their own personal narratives and Deep Listening practice. This year, 5HE expands its work at NBJ to weekly, year-round engagement, presenting regular rituals that encourage a group culture of belonging, and help students to find mental and emotional freedom through mindfulness and creativity.

Q1

How do you see the arts/culture/humanities as being essential?

Melissa Ngan: A primary focus of our work is that everyone can, and everyone *should* make art. Often, we think of art-making as something that only those who have been trained can do, or as a privilege for those with means, or as a problem-solver when healing and change are needed. Every native culture has inclusive art making as part of how it carries its stories, heals body and spirit, and connects us to ourselves and to each other. We would benefit so much from remembering that conception of the arts as essential to the human experience.



Marc Perlsh Photography

Q2

What is the most important thing people should know about your work?

Melissa Ngan: Collaboration is central to everything we do. Our artistic programs include partnerships with artists of all disciplines (living composers, video game designers, graphic novelists, actors) and with non-arts partners (workers' rights organizations, agricultural communities, ecological and conservation groups) through our civic practice work. Our educational and social impact programs serving people transitioning from homelessness or incarceration use musical improvisation and composition to advance participants' mindfulness, agency, empowerment, collective decision-making, and creativity. And, we teach what we learn; an established partner to orchestras, opera companies, and higher education institutions nationwide, our creative partnerships result in bold new directions in emerging artist training and community-focused work.

Q3

Who makes your work possible?

Melissa Ngan: We are grateful to have incredible partners in this work. Our residency partners work hand in hand with us to develop and co-create programs (Deborah's Place, Ignite, Cara Chicago, Nancy B. Jefferson Alternative School at the Cook County Juvenile Temporary Detention Center, Youth Job Center). Loyola University's Center for Urban Research and Learning has been our research and evaluation partner for 5 years, measuring and communicating impact. We are also supported generously by local and national funders, including the National Endowment for the Arts, Paul M. Angell Family Foundation, Albert Pick Jr. Fund, Illinois Arts Council, Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, Alphawood Foundation, MacArthur Fund for Arts & Culture at Prince, City of Chicago DCASE, Steven R. Gerber Trust, and of course, IL Humanities. We are also grateful to our board and volunteers who have helped to guide and shape our work since our inception.

Upcoming Events

www.fifth-house.com/events

Check out our daily 10am Deep Listening live streams every weekday, and our Colortunes programs for kids at 1:30 on Thursdays — all at www.facebook.com/fifthhouseensemble.

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