

# BUILDING A STRONGER COMMUNITY THROUGH MUSIC

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Music makes a difference. It draws individuals together, creates friendships, and helps build communities. It invests young people with confidence, drive, and passion. It enriches life itself.

Something so fundamental should be accessible to everyone in our society – but it isn't.

The Hamilton Music Collective exists to help people overcome the economic, social and educational barriers that stand in the way for many. Its most celebrated program, An Instrument For Every Child, has seen enormous success by reaching out to Hamilton neighbourhoods and at-risk populations via schools and Boys & Girls Clubs, providing instruments, education and opportunities for our youth to discover the potency music can have in their lives.

The HMC, however, has many other programs. Their vision was to create a true community hub that could enrich *anyone's* life. Without a permanent, appropriate home base, this vision was difficult to turn into reality.

The Gasworks, at 141 Park Street North, is not only the headquarters they needed – it's the consummate community arts facility.



Built in 1850, the Gasworks takes its name from the property's original purpose – an industrial space where flammable coal gas was produced to power the lives of Hamiltonians. As goal gas was replaced by hydroelectric power, the building changed purposes but remained a heritage fixture in the downtown core.



In 2016, The Gasworks was purchased by the John and Ellie Voortman Charitable Foundation. The Voortman Foundation work alongside charities that share their community-first values. Voortman Foundation chairman<sup>[1]</sup> Carl Joosse saw this inner-city heritage site, magnificent but tired, as a place where someone could foster bright futures for Hamilton youth. The Foundation purchased the building knowing that our inner city was a place of hope but also hardship, of progress but also poverty. They believed in the HMC mission to the point that they were willing to purchase the

Gasworks, but also to fund its revitalization as well. To help realize the Foundation and the HMC's joint vision, they turned to Hamilton firm Thier + Curran Architects who designed and oversaw the project.



The Gasworks is a true cultural hub – a centralized location that will make education, exploration, and entertainment accessible for its inner-city neighbours and anyone else who wishes to participate. That participation can take on many forms, thanks to the HMC's variety of programs. There are performance programs for youth, such as JAMBASSADORS, where middle- and high-school students have an opportunity to demonstrate their skills. There is the Open Jam for Kids, which brings novice players together with local professional musicians, also in a live setting. At the most introductory level, there is the Instrument Petting Zoo, where anyone can try a variety of musical instruments at community events city-wide. Older youth can learn about hip-hop, EDM and other electronic production techniques through the Beats By U! program. Future plans include the soon-to-be-launched Music for Mental Wellness, a songwriting program for older youth, utilizing songwriting and recording of pop songs to engage and promote wellness and empowerment in a time when the challenge of mental wellness has become a crisis in many populations.

The Gasworks contains classroom spaces, collaborative spaces, a recording studio, and event rental areas. The Gasworks is not only for musicians, but for music and performance lovers, whether it's a presentation by HMC youth programs or simply a great concert for everyone. As the pandemic stretches into 2021, the excitement about live music grows more palpable.

The building itself is a heritage structure, one that is both old and new, both traditional and forward-looking, much like the city itself. The Park St. façade has been returned to its former splendour, while the new back-end addition provides what was lacking – the new lobby, a green room, a loading dock, all things a modern performance space cannot do without. It also features more classroom space. The covered porch welcomes you into the building and doubles as a performance space. Large seating areas, windows, and even a fireplace make the space feel welcoming as opposed to intimidating – because for some, being involved in the community is intimidating enough already. Everyone should feel welcome; naturally, to that end, the space is now fully accessible.



Urban renewal is important for our city's future. Yet we must never lose sight of those who are often left behind. Communities must be improved for all, not for a select few. The HMC have always extended a hand into the inner-city community, and it made no sense to design a space that felt elitist, out of touch or, more importantly, out of reach. The Gasworks is functional and beautiful, and it feels accessible without feeling institutional. With creativity and an understanding of what was needed, Thier + Curran ensured that the modest renovation delivered a metamorphosis. This building is exactly what it needs to be, where it needs to be, for those who need to be part of it.



The arts have suffered immensely in 2020. Yet in a time when both adults and children are losing opportunities, we must respond by *providing* opportunities. With the Gasworks, the HMC and the Voortman foundation have created something visionary and important. Cities across Canada should look to the Gasworks as a blueprint for innovative and direct community engagement, and as a model arts facility for our rapidly-changing world. Astrid Hepner is the President and CEO of the Hamilton Music Collective. For More Information visit the [Hamilton Music Collective](https://hamiltonmusiccollective.ca/donate/). (<https://hamiltonmusiccollective.ca/donate/>)

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