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North America focus

Spotlight on the classical scene in the US and Canada



Cellist Matt Haimovitz has made a speciality out of playing in unusual venues

The 'other' classical music scene

Alternative venues are springing up everywhere, finds Laurence Vittes, and they're re-energising the industry

Whether it's Brahms in a brothel, Mendelssohn at weddings, the Three Tenors at Dodger Stadium or Yo-Yo and friends at this year's presidential inauguration, classical music transcends the perceived limitations of venue more easily and powerfully than most genres. It's no surprise that classical music in alternative venues like clubs, coffee shops and industrial parks is helping lead the industry into the new century, generating waves of interest in the music while attracting and perhaps even creating young consumers with money to spend. They are what Brooklyn-based artist manager Sarah Gordon calls "gateway drugs to hook people into classical music."

On the Left Coast, year-old Classical Underground LA, presided over by an extravagantly mustachioed painter named Alexey Steele, is providing unique monthly demonstrations of the hook. By day, the 7500-foot studio in a middle-of-nowhere industrial park 22 miles south-east of Walt Disney Concert Hall and the fashionable artists' lofts of downtown Los Angeles is Steele's place of work, hung with sensuous nudes and enormous landscapes.

Once a month Steele shoots out, rave-like, a last-minute e-mail invitation to his friends. He tells them who the players and the composers will be. He reminds them to bring chairs and food. He warns them that this time the music will start on time, although it never does.

The players are drawn on an ad hoc basis from the ranks of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the studios and visiting musicians. At the March concert there were string-players from the Vienna Philharmonic, organist Christoph Bull and a brilliant young Russian cellist named Boris Andrianov.

They came together to play Baroque, Classical and modern music. To cap off the evening, Andrianov brought the house down with Rachmaninov, Schumann, Piazzolla and three stunning solo pieces by Giovanni Sollima.

The bright, shining crowd of as many as 400 actors, painters, scientists, musicians, writers and models, most of them young and beautiful, were clearly enjoying their classical music evening out on the town. Eager listeners surrounded the musicians on every side, hangers-on moved around the periphery for different views and

smokers who went outside to enjoy their sinful pleasures could still hear strains of the glorious music.

Steele, who peppers his non-stop reflections with an ack-ack laugh that is equal parts d'Artagnan and Captain Hook, sees his Classical Underground evenings as "guardians of art, not entertainment or decoration". His audience, he says, "wants their music true and real, stripped of pretence – they just never realised they could find it at a classical music concert". Being a metaphysical Russian, Alexey believes in drawing attention to the "experiential nature of Art" by presenting it with no pretensions (except that he phrases this in a rather more blunt way). "Classical music," the hirsute impresario says, "rocks. Ack-ack-ack."

Oblivious to the laughter emanating west of the Hudson, New York City and its environs remain the 800lb gorilla of the alternative venue scene. You can almost see the pilgrimage of young musicians streaming to hot multi-genre entertainment clubs and venues like Le Poisson Rouge, Joe's Pub and Drom.

Le Poisson Rouge, a multimedia art cabaret founded by musicians



on the site of the historic Village Gate is perhaps the most frequently used example of an alternative venue. Dedicated to the fusion of popular and art cultures in music, film, theatre, dance and fine art, the venue's mission is "to revive the symbiotic relationship between art and revelry; to establish a creative asylum for both artists and audiences".

David Handler, one of Le Poisson's two proprietors along with Justin Kantor, cuts through the mission statement. "Look," he says, "classical music's problem is more about packaging than content. Also overcoming the fact that younger people have been for many reasons disassociating from classical music." He described the Poisson's role vis-à-vis classical music as a "taste-definer, chaperone and introducer for a younger, more curious, more eager demographic that has not yet been tapped into".

The Poisson hosted an album-release party for pianist Simone Dinnerstein followed by a recital at which she played Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. "Next on the schedule," Handler laughs, "was Mos Def." With ticket prices ranging from \$10 to \$25, I asked Handler whether the multimedia cabaret made money. "We do," he says, "by presenting many genres including rock and more popular, accessible acts. We could probably make the club go on classical music alone, but we don't want to go that way."

Other notable Big Apple venues include the Blender Theatre at Gramercy which books jazz, classical and world music. Then there is the performance space at



Clockwise from right:
Lara St John; Vadim Repin;
Le Poisson's David Handler and
Justin Kantor; Simone Dinnerstein

the Society for Ethical Culture/Ethical Culture Fieldston School where the Mark O'Connor New York City String Camp 2009 will be held. Finally, mention must be made of Ronen Givony who seems to have assumed the status of godfather of New York's new music scene, a legend who is reputed to attract to his events a rock audience with classical music sensibilities. Many observers claim that the sonic fusion experiments of Givony's Wordless Music Series a few years ago was the tipping-point that gave the new venues the momentum they are now enjoying.

But if LA and New York think they've got the corner on classical music chic, they'd better wake up and see that the rest of the US ain't marching in lockstep with old-fashioned classical concerts either.

MICHAEL DARTER, VLADIMIR ZIMAKOV, MATT HENNEK/DG, POISSON ROUGE



Far left: Impresario and artist Alexey Steele; Boris Andrianov plays at Classical Underground

Cellist Matt Haimovitz, who has made a career out of appearing in alternative venues, started testing material for his new CD by taking it to clubs in cities such as Buffalo, Boulder and Denver. When the recording is done, he'll take the programme back on the road. It's where his CDs sell best, he told me.

Violinist Lara St John, whose new Vivaldi-Piazzolla CD raced out of the starting-blocks earlier this year, fondly mentioned a solo Bach night with mandolinist Mike Marshall at the Freight & Salvage Coffee House in Berkeley. "It wasn't the same people who go to Davies Hall in San Francisco," she comments. Patricia Price, classical product manager at Allegro Music, mentioned Rimsky-Korsakoff House in Portland where "they have fantastic coffee and usually amazing live classical music."

The Yellow Lounge at Cookies restaurant in Berlin is an example of classical music chic on an international urban scale. Vadim Repin, who performed there recently, tells me that the atmosphere and the energy "was

great. It was amazing," he says, "to watch the reaction of people who were hearing live classical music for the first time, and there were undoubtedly quite a few: I could see it in their eyes."

But, in addition to potential new converts, how much actual income do these alternative venues contribute to the industry? Alex Miller, general manager and senior VP of the Sony Masterworks and Victor labels, is as excited about the new venues, including their commercial significance, as anyone.

"One of the really cool things that's happening," he tells me, "is the great variety of venues that are available to classical musicians, certainly in NYC. It's much like New York at the tail of the '70s when club life was actively open to new and mainstream classical music as well as world, rock and jazz."

Miller acknowledges the importance of high-tech. "The current crop of clubs offer a rotating library of artists and genres that might not fit into a niche but reflect the ability of iPods to mix genres in a completely free-flow, free-fall environment."

Sony artists have not been shy about plunging into the brave new world. Cellist Jan Vogler performed

and recorded Shostakovich and Hendrix at Le Poisson Rouge. James Galway and Tiempo Libre (featuring their "Bach to Havana" album) performed at Drom.

"It's a more youthful, adventurous audience," Miller explains. "Our artists get exposure to more than the regular subscription crowd." New and emerging artists have a crucible in which they can "organically go about growing their fan base. It's a lot less pressure than playing Carnegie Hall. And even for Galway," Miller adds, "playing at Drom was an opportunity to appeal to an audience that just never would have come uptown."

Allegro's Price concurs. "The industry and its customers are changing. And we are thriving through the change, largely because our labels embrace new possibilities of increasing young classical customers." Like going to see Joel Fan at Le Poisson Rouge in April where his Reference Recordings "West of the Sun" release concert was scheduled to be held.

"Classical music can't always be a focused evening in fancy dress," says Price. "Some of my favourite memories include sitting around in jeans with friends and playing chamber music. Listeners who are not performing musicians should also be able to experience music in a similarly warm and congenial environment."

Given the rise of classical music in alternative venues, it will be no surprise that one of the newest takes place in a church that isn't a church. It's Felix Wurman's Church of Beethoven in Albuquerque, New Mexico, now in its second season in a custom-designed warehouse with vaulted ceilings and seating for 150. There, Wurman says, "we plan to produce more music, more poetry and move into other areas of the humanities and health-related fields."

One programme in March was Debussy's String Quartet, percussion music performed by Hovey Corbin and Steve Chavez, and poetry read by Zachary Kluckman. "Come at 9.30am for coffee," the announcement read. "Music begins at 10.30 sharp."

So, what's next? Probably playing Beethoven in a concert hall. Get outta here! Ack-ack-ack! ●

