



Orchestras  
across the  
country are  
tapping into  
listeners'  
newfound  
curiosity at  
alternative  
venues—and,  
more often than  
not, they're  
finding new  
homes and  
building their  
brands.

# Bar Co

by Jayson Greene



Street scene outside Manhattan's Le Poisson Rouge (left) and the club's interior (above). Musicians who have performed there include violinist Jennifer Choi, pianist Simone Dinnerstein, Calder String Quartet, ACME Contemporary Music Ensemble, and So Percussion.

**One night last February at Le Poisson Rouge, the hip new performance space in downtown Manhattan, singer-songwriter and novelist John Wesley Harding dropped by for a three-concert residency. He came backed by an unlikely cast of collaborators: novelists Rick Moody and Jonathan Ames; droll hipster comedian Eugene Mirman; country-folk singer PT Walkley; and post-modern ventriloquist Carla Rhodes. The view from the stage was that of Manhattan's young, intellectual elite: Among the black-frame-besppectaced audience, there was a preponderance of master's degrees and first novels in various stages of completion. The atmosphere was loose and informal, the cozy, low-lit vibe punctuated by the murmur of conversation and the occasional clink of wine glasses. Two days later, the ACME Contemporary Music Ensemble was on the same stage, performing works by Louis Andriessen, John Cage, and others, and the crowd again consisted of curious young twenty- and thirty-somethings, listening appreciatively as they toyed with their drinks. To them, John Cage and John Wesley Harding were all a part of the same spectrum: something stimulating to take in on a Friday night.**

It's a scene repeating itself at emerging venues in several cities, as orchestras branch out into rock clubs and trendy restaurants and find a different group of concertgoers who normally might not venture into a concert hall. Le Poisson Rouge opened its doors on June 16, 2008, with a concert



Simone Dinnerstein performing Bach's *Goldberg Variations* at Le Poisson Rouge, August 2008

Nicolas Petitfleur

movitz has been playing in bars and clubs since at least 2002, and the Kronos Quartet and even Emanuel Ax, who performed at Manhattan's Knitting Factory in 1997, did it before Haimovitz—but LPR has capitalized on the concept to a greater degree than most. "Technology has allowed for an explosion in the variety of music that is readily available to us, but people need some sort of taste-defining mechanism to help them sort through everything," says David Handler, the Manhattan School of Music-trained composer and violinist who co-founded LPR with cellist and fellow MSM student Justin Kantor. "There are many taste-definers online—Pitchfork is a big example—but, and I don't want to sound grandiose, I can't really think of any other physical space that is doing this quite the way we are." LPR's devotion to such deeply eclectic, tastemaking programming

them to *Petrushka*. Jazzers, I would give Debussy or Ravel. If I had friends into trance music, I would give them 1960s American minimalism. I found that the correlations were often very strong."

Handler, 28, along with the likeminded cellist Justin Kantor, whom he met in 1999 while studying at the Manhattan School of Music, began to search for funding to establish a concert space where these sorts of connections could flourish. "I really felt there was a niche, or a need, to be filled," Handler says. "When Justin and I were first talking this through, we were sensing that there was something in the air, and still is, with people's general curiosity. I think there is more curiosity in the average listener than there perhaps ever was before. We talk a lot about demographics in our business, but I don't think curiosity has a demographic. We really think of the

## Orchestras intrepid enough to find a way out of the concert hall are being rewarded with the sort of enthusiastic, inquisitive young audiences that have eluded them in their home venue.

featuring Damon and Naomi of the seminal '80s indie-rock band Galaxie 500. That same week, Rickie Lee Jones sang; pianist Simone Dinnerstein performed Bach's *Goldberg Variations*; jazz pianist Robert Glasper accompanied rapper, singer, and actor Mos Def; and German composer Max Richter played piano in his own works alongside violinist Jennifer Choi. Since then, Le Poisson Rouge (LPR for short) has been "serving art and alcohol," as the small type on the program states, to a steady stream of packed houses. And the art on tap has ranged from the Calder String Quartet to experimental electronic duo Matmos to modern-classical ensemble So Percussion to noise-rock outfit Deerhunter to synth-pop purveyors Hot Chip to Tuvan throat-singers Huun-Huur Tu to house-music faves The Juan MacLean to electro-rap forefather Afrika Bambaataa—sometimes on back-to-back nights. For New York City's young musical epicures, it is as if some generous benefactor has built a temple to reenact their iPod playlist—and "classical music" is one among the eclectic offerings to have found a permanent and surprisingly comfortable home there.

The notion of performing classical music in a hip nightclub setting hardly began with LPR, of course—cellist Matt Hai-

has earned it an avalanche of glowing media coverage in its first year of existence, and a spot in downtown Manhattan's cultural inner circle.

The vision for a "multimedia art cabaret," as LPR bills itself, began with David Handler's dissatisfaction, common among young classical musicians, with the insularity of the field he had chosen. "I was frustrated by what seemed to be the sterility of the institutions associated with classical music," he says. "I couldn't quite reconcile the fact that something that had this cult devotion to it was relatively unknown to the majority of folks just one block away from my school. I think that from the musicians' standpoint, there was often a sense of entitlement leaving a conservatory, this feeling that by virtue of the time spent and the technique acquired—you know, 'for that reason and that reason only, I deserve to be listened to.' I feel it is as much a responsibility of the performers, musicians, institutions, and ensembles to make their music relevant to a public that hasn't been really given adequate preparation for it or exposure to it.

"When I would introduce classical music to my friends, for instance, I would put together a playlist, and I would try to draw correlations for them. If I had friends who listened to death metal, I would introduce

people we are trying to reach as more of a 'psychographic,' because it's not really so much age or income or whatever the typical criteria are. We are just trying to reach people with a willingness to understand, to listen with open ears."

Handler adds: "Our governing principle is quality, not genre. We had Mos Def in here 24 hours after Simone Dinnerstein. We had Lou Reed in here; we had Dick Gregory. We don't really have much belief in genre distinction as anything but an afterthought. I think it was Duke Ellington who said, 'There's two kinds of music: good and the other kind.'"

The wildly diverse audiences who flock to LPR would seem to agree with this definition. "I'm happy to say that our 'target audience' is so varied that it is difficult to define," says Handler. "Our classical listenership is uniquely very young. The average age at our classical shows is not all that different, I would say, from the average age at our indie-rock or international or world-music shows. We had Steve Reich here last September, and we did the 'You Are' Variations and *Music for 18 Musicians*. The room was packed with 400-plus twenty- and thirty-somethings, the average age being, I would say, around 28 or 30. And that was really refreshing."

Building the sort of concert venue that can accommodate a squalling noise-punk outfit one night, an *oud* player the next, and a chamber orchestra the night after that is not an undertaking for the faint of heart. Logistically and acoustically, the level of flexibility required is nearly unprecedented. “We spent the better part of two years looking at spaces,” says Handler. “The most important thing to us was that it would be as malleable and acoustically promising a space as possible. We knew we wanted to do in-the-round configurations; we knew we wanted to do antiphonal music; and we knew we wanted large ensembles. We didn’t want any performers to be out of bounds for us, where we would have to say ‘no’ because we couldn’t accommodate them.”

With their list narrowed down by these conditions, Handler and Kantor, with a luck bordering on uncanny, came across and bought the former home of the famed Village Gate, which had closed in 1993—a hallowed ground that had seen, in its lifetime, early appearances by the young Aretha Franklin, the premiere of the cabaret revue *Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris*, and live performances by Charles Mingus, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis. Acoustician John Storyk (“the Yoda of acousticians,” as Handler calls him), who designed acoustics for *Jazz @ Lincoln Center*, signed on for the challenge of designing a space that could contain both punk rock and chamber music. The result somehow allows listeners to savor both the roar of a rock band at full blast and the pin-drop dynamics of acoustic chamber playing. The space holds an audience of 800 (250 seated).

all around them, and orchestras intrepid enough to find a way out of the concert hall are being rewarded with the sort of enthusiastic, inquisitive young audiences that have eluded them in their home venue.

Kathryn Wyatt, director of education and community engagement for the multi-venue North Carolina Symphony, based in Raleigh, found herself surprised by the overwhelming response when members of the orchestra performed a one-off chamber concert in February 2008 at a Raleigh restaurant/nightclub called Humble Pie that can hold 100 people. The performance was part of a citywide festival centered around performances of Shostakovich’s score for the 1964 Soviet film of *Hamlet*, and Wyatt wasn’t sure what to expect. “I went into it thinking that any response would have

participated were elated: “They came up to me and said, ‘We *have* to do another one of these, and we *have* to make it a series.’” Since that successful first foray, the orchestra has performed three successive Pub Concerts, all at Humble Pie, featuring repertoire ranging from Golijov to Leonardo Balada to Brahms. All have sold out.

Gil Rose, artistic director of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, came up with his orchestra’s ongoing club series in a similarly accidental fashion—the orchestra’s Club Concerts, now in their seventh season, were originally planned as supplementary events around a regular series. Once they took on a life of their own, however, Rose granted them their independence. The initial Club Concerts, says Rose, were presented in close proximity to larger concerts,



**The North Carolina Symphony’s sold-out Pub Concerts at the Raleigh restaurant/club Humble Pie, above, have featured repertoire ranging from Golijov and Shostakovich to Leonardo Balada and Brahms.**

#### Orchestras Take Note

Orchestra administrators might justifiably wonder what all this activity has to do with them; no matter how they diagram it, the 80-plus musicians required for *The Rite of Spring* are not squeezing into a packed club anytime soon. And yet orchestras are trying out alternative club and restaurant venues and discovering that the newfound musical curiosity Handler describes isn’t limited to big-city dwellers—it’s an untapped resource

been a good one,” she says. “The Raleigh/Chapel Hill area definitely has a vital downtown—Chapel Hill is a college town, after all—but it isn’t New York or Chicago. But the performance was packed! People made reservations way in advance, and it was a completely new group of people—75 percent hadn’t been to see the orchestra before, but they had heard about this event on Facebook or Meetup.com.”

Wyatt says the orchestra musicians who

something that reinforced a theme from the regular series, “but they quickly evolved into their own thing.” This underlines a bit of wisdom that crops up again and again with club ventures: Do not necessarily expect them to result in an influx of new ticket sales for subscription concerts. “I think a lot of people are doing this because they expect it will bring them a younger, hipper crowd,” notes Rose, “and I really don’t think that’s the way to go about it. Any way an

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Lisa Bielawa

Photo: Mansfield

orchestra has of projecting itself outward into the community is in service of the mission. BMOP is a unique orchestra in that we exclusively perform new music, but this principle holds true for everyone. As long as the mission of the organization is well projected in the performance and the repertoire, then it is successful, because it feeds back to the mothership.”

Lisa Bielawa, who recently concluded her third and final season as BMOP’s composer-in-residence, has been serving as “host” for the orchestra’s Club Concerts since 2006, and she has gained valuable insights about the unique ambience of a club performance. “As a host, the most important thing I do is set the tone,” she says. “I mingle, I walk through, I talk to people, I introduce people to each other. The instant I get on stage, the audience is looking to me for cues, because it may be an unusual thing for them—you know, ‘We’ve just been bused in from the senior center and we’re in a gay bar and I just ordered a pink beverage and some pasta’—and they look up on stage and I get up there and they just have no idea what to expect. The players need it too, sometimes! As a host I need to put both sides at ease, to show people right away that we are there to hear some music together in an informal setting. I try to stimulate that feeling that comes so naturally in bars but not so much in rows of felt-covered chairs.”

“That feeling” is a selling point of its own, and suggests why the crowd com-



Boston Modern Orchestra Project's popular Club Concerts take place at Boston's Moonshine Room at Club Café, led here by Gil Rose.



Gil Rose, artistic director and creator of BMOP's Club Concerts

**“The instant I get on stage, the audience is looking to me for cues—they just have no idea what to expect,” says Lisa Bielawa, opposite, who hosts the Boston Modern Orchestra Project’s Club Concerts. “The players need it too, sometimes!”**

ing out to hear chamber performances of Ligeti and Adams in a nightclub might not be showing up at the concert hall for the regular subscription series. Wyatt notes that the newcomers who flocked to hear Shostakovich and Brahms at Humble Pie weren't always coming to hear those same composers at the orchestra's home venue. “I wouldn't necessarily see them at the next orchestra concert, but I *would* see them at the next pub concert,” she says.

When Eckart Preu, music director of the Spokane Symphony, started the orchestra's Symphony on the Edge series at the Spokane location of the Knitting Factory underground-rock-club franchise, he noticed a similar phenomenon. “There was certainly some overlap in audience base—for instance, we saw some symphony subscribers at these concerts, and they were people who would never come to the Knitting Factory normally. But I think there is a

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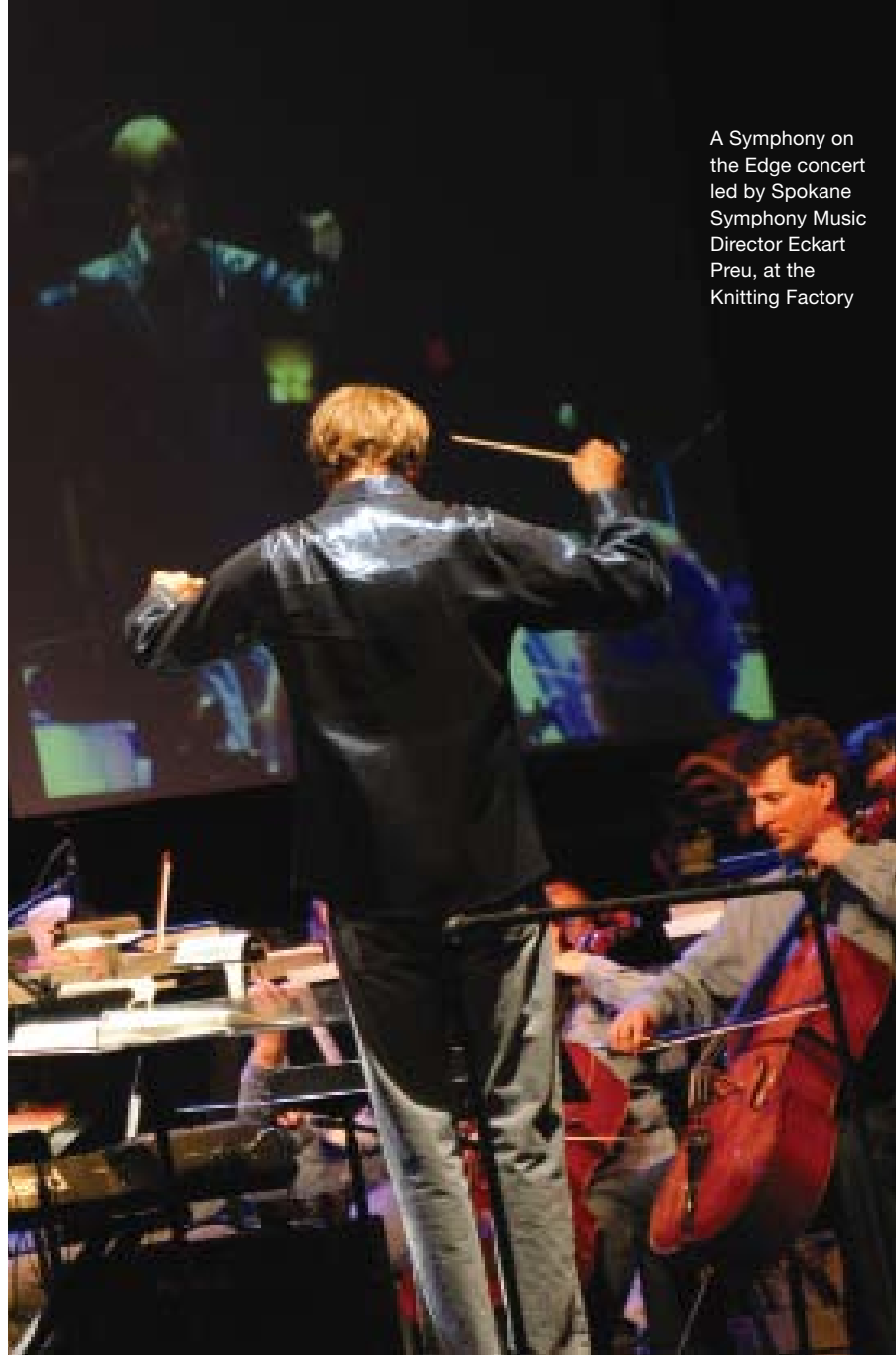


Program on a table at Spokane's Knitting Factory, where the Spokane Symphony's Symphony on the Edge concerts take place

Kristin Burgess

healthy contingent of people who *only* come to those concerts, and they are effectively saying, "This is what we are not getting from a concert hall." Preu started the series, which pairs contemporary repertoire with video projections, in 2004, as a way of "reaching more people, and breaking down some of these barriers we are all trying to break down." He says, "I think people come to the club concert for the intimacy and for the novelty of hearing an orchestra in a unique space, but they also know they are getting music there that they are getting nowhere else."

Indeed, the repertoire orchestras bring to club concerts is an eclectic grab bag of edgier, contemporary fare that wouldn't make it in a concert hall and standard repertoire that benefits from the vibrant intimacy of the surroundings. "When I first started doing these concerts," says Bielawa, "I remember talking to Gil and thinking 'You know, I bet there is a broader range of music that could probably work in a club than people might ordinarily think.' Sometimes there's a self-consciousness and pressure to 'play for the club,' this idea that because of the venue, the music needs to be groovy, hard-edged, and propulsive, but that's not the only thing that works. I've discovered over the last three years that there's all kinds of music you wouldn't expect that works well. I've done multi-track pieces, microtonal stuff. Gabby Diaz, one of our violinists, did a solo Carter violin piece at the last one." Or, as Preu puts it: "It's amazing what people suddenly are



Kristin Burgess

A Symphony on the Edge concert led by Spokane Symphony Music Director Eckart Preu, at the Knitting Factory

**"I think there is a healthy contingent of people who *only* come to those concerts," says Spokane Symphony Music Director Eckart Preu of the orchestra's club concerts at the Knitting Factory. "And they are effectively saying, 'This is what we are not getting from a concert hall.'"**

ready to listen to when you get a drink in their hand—they give you so much more leeway!"

This readiness and eager receptivity among audiences, whether it comes with cocktails or not, was the one constant among all the orchestras I spoke with; the programming and logistical details vary, but everyone circled back to the palpable excitement and curiosity that radiates from the audiences. "When everyone

is that close, you see such an immediate reaction—it's so different from the concert hall. It's a very visceral feeling," says Preu. "People who come to these concerts are still just music lovers, and the more ways we find of reaching those people, the better off we all are." [EJ](#)

JAYSON GREENE is production editor of eMusic and the former associate editor of *Symphony*.