

An Unsolicited Review | Chatter at The Rail Yards

By Kip Allen | May 5, 2014

There are certain occasions when you know something important is taking place. A convergence of energies makes for an electric, even jubilant shared awareness.

One such event happened last Saturday, when the ensemble CHATTER played its first concert at the historic ABQ Rail Yards – only the second concert ever in that city-owned space. The performance became an unusually conscious combination of music, environment, adventure, and community, with the ultimate energy coming from the audience itself.

The venue was the Blacksmith Shop at the historic downtown train complex. Green and beige and clear window-paned walls soar dramatically to high, vaulted ceilings of this secular cathedral. Acoustically generous and lively, the space is welcoming and curiously appropriate for the chosen music. Even the frequent addition of sounds from trains passing nearby managed to blend with the musicians' efforts rather than contradict them.

As one audience member whispered during the Bach, "This is the Concerto for Two Violins, Strings, Continuo and Amtrak."

Three works were featured, two of them written relatively recently, the third more than 300 years ago. All three explore various ways music looks to its past as either a firm foundation or a crumbling nostalgia. The concert showcased the two extraordinary solo violinists, David Felberg (music director of CHATTER) and Ruxandra Simionescu-Marquardt. The soloists were ably supported by some of New Mexico's finest musicians.

Russian composer Alfred Schnittke's "Concerto Grosso #1" began with a prepared piano creating a harsh, metallic sound intriguingly reminiscent of the labor once performed in the Blacksmith shop. Over a base of droning strings, ghostly violins seemed to search yearningly for a long-past world of melody and beauty. Occasional romantic fragments surfaced from the dissonance, teasing musical memory and our expectations. One wishes Schnittke had made more such connections.

Johann Sebastian Bach's glorious Double Violin Concerto anchored the concert in tradition and musicality. Felberg and Marquardt listened thoroughly to each other as they traded phrases and shared a profound joy in music-making that brought cheers from the audience.

Musicians from Simon and Garfunkel to John Cage have played with the inherent paradox of music written to describe silence. Contemporary Estonian composer Arvo Pärt has contributed his version in the second half of "Tabula Rasa," or "Blank Slate." The first movement, "Game," featured bursts of energetic, folk-like lyricism from the two solo violins, set against a wall of sound from the rest of the ensemble.

"Silence" uses what has been described as "holy minimalism." The hypnotic repetition of short, lyrical phrases gradually diminished in volume. The music spiraled upward and disappeared. That impression was augmented when a single sparrow in the Blacksmith Shop rafters continued the performance with a distant, gentle burst of song.

The ABQ Rail Yards proved itself an exciting performance space with generous acoustics and a promising future for New Mexico's performing arts presentations.

The ensemble CHATTER again proved itself a provider of opportunities to hear music both familiar and far from the mainstream. While this reviewer enjoys the depth of the mainstream over the outlying eddies, CHATTER seems willing to take risks and their consequences. Particular recognition goes to the extraordinary dedication, organizational skills, and grace of Pamela Michaelis, CHATTER's board president. She deserves every decibel of the audience's roar of approval when introduced.

And the Albuquerque audience proved itself to be a large, vibrant, enthusiastic group, willing to be led on musical adventures in familiar and unfamiliar landscapes.