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Chatter Concerning the Heavenly Sounds Made at the Albuquerque Rail Yard

By Brian Nixon
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Question: What do the movies *Transformers*, *The Avengers*, *Terminator*, and *The Lone Ranger*, have in common with the music of Alfred Schnittke, Johann Sebastian Bach, and Arvo Pärt?

Give up?



Blacksmith Shop in Downtown Albuquerque, affectionately called “The Yards.”

Answer: The Santa Fe Railway Train Yard in the heart of Albuquerque, New Mexico, affectionately known as “The Yards.”

The above-mentioned artistic expressions have found—at one point in the past fifteen years—a temporary abode in the historic buildings. The movie industry filmed blockbuster pictures or constructed sets in the large rooms. And the music, recently performed by New Mexico performance group, Chatter [1], has filled the rooms with intriguing and heavenly sounds.

To say the least, the Yard has become a cultural icon in New Mexico.

Constructed between the years of 1915 to 1925, the Santa Fe Railway Train Yard consists of eighteen buildings, with the cathedral of the group being the Machine Shop.

The history of the Santa Fe Railway Train Yard follows the boom and bust of train domination in America. According to Internet information, “The shops became Albuquerque's largest employer, with 970 employees (then about a quarter of the city's workforce) in 1919, and a peak of 1,500 in the 1940s. The core operation was maintenance of steam locomotives, which required a complete rebuild every 12 to 18 months.

“At their peak, the Albuquerque shops completed around 40 such overhauls per month. However, activity at the rail yard declined in the 1950s as the Santa Fe transitioned from steam to diesel locomotives. The railroad decided to locate its diesel repair facilities at the Cleburne and San Bernardino yards, scaling back operations in Albuquerque to around 200 employees. The shops were shut down completely in 1970.”



Chatter performing in the Blacksmith Shop

In the concert program handed out at the recent Chatter performance, more background was given on the history of the buildings. The literature states, “The Albuquerque Rail Yards are a massive City-owned complex sprawling over 27.3 acres in the old Barelmas neighborhood. Established by the Atlantic and Pacific (A & P) railroad in 1880 after Albuquerque was designated as the division point

between the A & P and Santa Fe Railways, the chief function of the complex was to maintain and repair locomotives.”

Concerning the unique nature of the architecture of the buildings, scholar, Grant Hildebrand states, the buildings—specifically the Machine Shop, “carried industrial architecture forward.”

During the 1970’s and 1980’s the Rail Yard fell in disrepute, becoming a place for drug deals and teenage mischief. Even today as one walks through some of the buildings, floors are in upheaval, windows broken, stairwells blocked off, and graffiti is present around the Yard, all a reminder of its years of regress.

Yet there’s something magical about the place. It may be the light penetrating through the windows, or the industrial architecture, or the history that’s housed within its dominating walls. Who knows? But the Yard holds a certain dream-like and mysterious quality, a place of imaginings and ideas.

Fortunately, the Yard was discovered by Hollywood in the 1990’s, becoming a go-to place for the movie industry, particularly the productions needing an industrial or otherworld-looking backdrop.

It’s during the boom of New Mexico film industry (late 90’s to the present), that both New Mexico, and specifically the Yard, got a new lease on life—literally. Hollywood productions came by the truckload to lease the buildings, using them as a backdrop for many blockbuster movies (some mentioned above).

I was fortunate enough to have walked around the Yard when the sets for the Disney production, *The Lone Ranger*, were being manufactured [2]. The sets appeared small in the buildings, dwarfed by the massive rooms, industrial basilicas of stark beauty.

I was enamored by the place, a haunting of fascination. Many people I’ve spoken with share the same feelings.

But I digress.

My recent visit wasn’t for the movies, but the music.

As mentioned above, local performance group, Chatter, hosted a concert of pure splendor and delight in the Blacksmith Building.

According to the concert program, the Blacksmith Shop was built in 1917, being the third largest building on the site. “The building is of steel frame construction with brick and glass exterior walls.”

Before the concert began I walked around the Shop, soaking in the atmosphere. The Blacksmith Shop windows are reminiscent of stained glass, with differing shades of green, a hue of calm in the midst of metal. People had cameras, snapping photos and pointing out unique elements found in the buildings such as an old boiler.

The concert itself was a grand success. Performing three pieces, the “Concerto Grosso No 1” by Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998), the “Concerto for 2 Violins” by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1720), and “Tabula Rasa” by Arvo Pärt (b1935).

At the beginning of the concert, music director, David Felberg, gave an apropos introduction, stating that the music, specifically the piece by Schnittke, conjoined the ancient and the modern—much like the building we sat, a conduit between two worlds.

The opening sequence of Schnittke’s piece, entitled the “Preludio”, used a treated piano, giving a metallic sound to the music. It was a marvelous compositional choice. As the piece progressed, so too did the obvious connection between the modern and the ancient, with Schnittke weaving within the composition both modern tonalities combined with older, Baroque sensibilities.

As the Chatter ensemble continued through the Bach to the Pärt, the connection between the ancient and modern became more manifest. The culmination was the Part, a confluence of antiquity and contemporary.

Pärt, an Estonian composer, wrote *Tabula Rasa* in 1977. It was one of the first compositions to use a new music language Part named “tintinnabuli.” Tintinnabuli is a form of music that has bell-like overtones, creating a mystical sound. As a Christian composer [3], Pärt integrates elements of chant in his music, bridging the ancient and modern soundscapes, or even the secular and sacred. Pärt describes tintinnabuli as white lights, stating, “I could compare my music to white light which contains all colors. Only a prism can divide the colors and make them appear; this prism could be the spirit of the listener.” Others have deemed Pärt’s style as “Holy minimalism.”

The fact is that Pärt’s music is awe-inspiring, compositions at its finest. And in the setting of an industrial performance space, the music took on new meaning: a dialogue between the primeval and present, the earthly and eternal.

The evening would not have been possible without the support from Chatter president, Pamela Michaelis or Artistic Directors, David Felberg and James Shields. The entire group—from musicians to volunteers—deserve a rousing “thank you” for pulling such a marvelous experience together. It takes passionate people to deliver a passionate experience. And the whole event did just this: it delivered.

But it must be said that in the midst of such wonderful music and people, the building was the true star of the day. The Yard has been delivering momentous occasions for over 90 years. Let’s hope the new arts-emphasis of the building will continue for the next one hundred and ninety years, reminding us of our past, but pressing towards the future.

1. Chatter is a not-for profit chamber music organization dedicated to providing unique experiences through intimate performance by professional musicians in unusual venues. For more information, click here: chatterabq.org

2. See ANS article, “On Creativity and the Creator,”
www.assistnews.net/Stories/2012/s12030105.htm

3. See article, “Why Arvo Pärt Matters”:
www.assistnews.net/Stories/2009/s09070077.htm

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