



What's All the Chatter?

David Felberg brings classical performances to edgy venues in Albuquerque.



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Gathered around a six-foot-long table beneath industrial workshop lights, their instrument cases flung open to prop up sheet music, the musicians resemble a team of surgeons bringing something to life: a musical Frankenstein's monster drawn from centuries-old violin concerti by Vivaldi and Stravinsky and

reassembled into a program about to be performed in a downtown Albuquerque warehouse on a Sunday morning. David Felberg, the artistic director of the string ensemble, plays the role of mad scientist. As the players pluck and bow through the rehearsal, Felberg administers gentle suggestions.

“Run the Stravinsky with 75 percent emotion.”

“Treat it like three big phrases.”

“Give it a bigger crescendo.”

With a mischievous glimmer in his eye, he looks up from his 1829 J. B. Vuillaume violin and asks, “What if we intersperse the Vivaldi with the Stravinsky?” When his fellow musicians exchange horrified looks—they’re minutes away from performing—he demurs. “Okay, well, maybe not today. But it would be cool.”

This maverick spirit infuses Felberg, who programs, plans, conducts, and often plays some 60 concerts a year, featuring more than 160 professional musicians, in his role with Ensemble Music New Mexico, the 501(c)(3) parent of Chatter. The nonprofit’s repertoire includes nearly weekly Chatter Sunday concerts (combinations of music and poetry); Chatter Cabaret chamber concerts six times a year; and Chatter 20-21 performances (boldly programmed concerts of music from the 20th and 21st centuries) once or twice a year. The latter series features midsize ensembles performing in unexpected venues, and this month’s presentation is no exception. Felberg will conduct in the abandoned blacksmith shop at Albuquerque’s Rail Yards, where the sounds of two grand pianos, one harpsichord, and a 24-piece string ensemble will soar. His penchant for unexpected venues and contemporary classical (aka New Music), not to mention his own talent as a violinist, have earned Felberg a place among the state’s music elite.

He’s a homegrown talent. His father, violinist Leonard Felberg, served as concertmaster of the Santa Fe Symphony for 24 years—a role David now holds—and his mother, Arlette Felberg, is a pianist and esteemed teacher. Although Felberg was immersed in music during his Albuquerque childhood and began playing violin at age five (“I didn’t know any different,” he says of his instrument choice), he didn’t express professional interest in music until college. He earned his master’s in orchestral conducting at the

University of New Mexico and was performing with the now defunct New Mexico Symphony Orchestra when, in 2002, he and friend Eric Walters formed Chatter to gain conducting and composing experience. Chatter held its inaugural concert in 2003 and found its footing by presenting a couple of concerts a year.

On a parallel track, Felberg had taken to playing weekend concerts as part of the popular Church of Beethoven concert-and-talk series, the creation of one of his friends, cellist and composer Felix Wurman. Upon Wurman's 2009 death, it seemed only fitting that the two envelope-pushing classical groups should merge, which they did in 2010. Thanks to Chatter's artistic staff, which includes Felberg and associate artistic director James Shields, and board members, including president Pamela Michaelis, the group is now *the* source for contemporary classical music in Albuquerque. Occasionally, the concert works are atonal or minimalist; often, they challenge audience tastes. Frequently, they've never been heard outside of New York or London—a coup for the Duke City.

“Nothing really sounds weird to me anymore,” says Felberg, who relies on the

Internet and his ever-present curiosity to unearth works from composing greats and modern unknowns alike. “They’re interesting, beautiful, and adventurous.” Unusual venues are another Chatter hallmark: Music is presented in stripped-down spaces where the players’ musicianship and the sounds are raw, perhaps never more so than during this month’s concert at the Blacksmith Shop at the Rail Yards.

Once the confluence of Albuquerque’s transit and commerce, the former Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway repair shop sat empty for nearly 50 years. It’s made appearances in *Terminator: Salvation*, *Breaking Bad*, and other Hollywood productions, but for the most part, this cathedral to the Industrial Age hasn’t been utilized. In the past year, the City of Albuquerque renovated minimally—replacing broken windows, adding lighting and the like—to transform it into a venue, albeit a rustic one. As Michaelis, whose spark of inspiration brought Chatter to the Yards, observes, “The building has such a decrepitness and vastness to it. What was missing was something really elegant.”

Works by European composers old and new are slated for the program. With the bare 25,000-square-foot space as inspiration, Felberg chose “Tabula Rasa,” a work by Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, to signify the Rail Yards’ new beginnings as a cultural space. He paired this work with others by Alfred Schnittke and J. S. Bach.

If anyone can pull it off, it’s Felberg, who has achieved status as “one of the most significant musical figures in our community,” says Christine Rancier, a violist for the New Mexico Philharmonic, where Felberg sits as associate concertmaster and conducts several times a year. He’s also the music director of the Albuquerque Philharmonic. In all his roles, Felberg balances conducting and performing at a high level. “He’s such a fine violinist. He approaches conducting as a musician,” says Rancier. “He’s very fun to watch. Very engaging and emotionally involved when he conducts and plays.”

But Felberg is more about artistic guts than glory. Describing Felberg’s approach as concertmaster of the Santa Fe Symphony, founder and general director Gregory W. Heltman observes, “He’s gentle and well studied. He commands our respect, but it’s not demanded.” Barbara Reeback, a faithful patron of Chatter Sunday, along with her husband, Del, appreciates Felberg’s combination of self-confidence and humility: “He animates what happens here. It feels like he’s welcoming us to his place. ... But it’s not just David’s platform. We as the audience trust him to make great artistic decisions. It’s adventurous programming. We accept that and go with it.”

As Reeback slides into her reserved seat at the spring Chatter Sunday concert, Felberg and his fellow musicians have taken the stage. He makes eye contact with each and inhales, his bow hovering above the strings. And in that infinitesimal pregnant pause, there’s a promise that something marvelous is about to live again. ✚

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