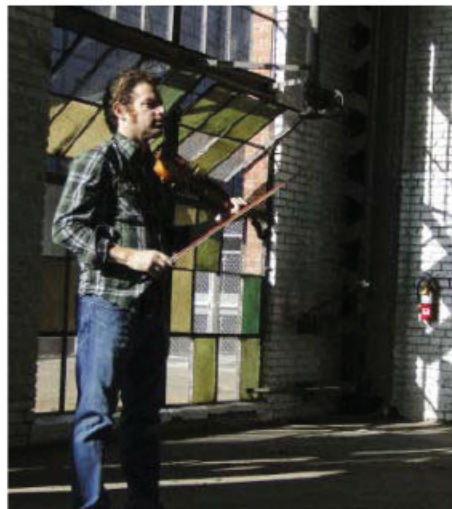


LISTEN UP

The New Mexican's Weekly Magazine
of Arts, Entertainment & Culture

Friday, May 2, 2014

Listen Up — Spatial soundscapes: Chatter in the Rail Yards



Violinist David Felberg; courtesy Chatter

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In its heyday, the hangerlike expanse of the Blacksmith Shop in the Albuquerque Rail Yards was a deafening locale, its 25,000 square feet ringing with clangorous noise as laborers repaired locomotive frames and forged replacement parts to keep the trains in working order. On Saturday, May 3, the long-abandoned space will again resonate, this time with sounds of a gentler sort, as the ensemble Chatter inaugurates the renovated building with a concert of music by Johann Sebastian Bach, Alfred Schnittke, and Arvo

Pärt. The strange harmony of contrasts is not lost on violinist David Felberg, the group's artistic director. "I find it very stimulating, coming into this place where they used to cast iron, a place of hot ovens and metal and hammers, and making music with these very delicate stringed instruments crafted out of wood."

The event has been eagerly anticipated as the initial public offering in a site that holds great potential for the Duke City. The Rail Yards occupies a 27-acre plot in the city's Barelás neighborhood, immediately south of downtown, not far from the National Hispanic Cultural Center and the ABQ BioPark Zoo. It began serving as a center for train repairs in the 1880s, and for decades it kept cars of the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad and the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway in working order. The Yards, as it became known, underwent terrific expansion from 1915 to 1925. Eighteen of its surviving buildings were constructed during those years, when it was the city's largest employer and operated as a self-sustaining industrial complex,

generating its own power and drawing its water from a bend in the Río Grande less than a half mile distant.

The sprawling complex was geared to maintain steam locomotives. The advent of diesel engines rendered it largely obsolete. Some retrofitting kept parts of it ticking after World War II, but by 1986 it was mothballed entirely and left to deteriorate for another two decades. The City of Albuquerque finally acquired the site in 2007, just in time for the economic downturn. Plans for eventual redevelopment began to take form all the same, and by 2011 the city was developing a master plan for the Rail Yards as a public/private partnership with Samitaur Constructs, a Los Angeles-based urban development and property management firm that specializes in community revitalization. Over time, the Yards will be transformed to include corporate and industrial facilities, workforce housing, retail spaces, a café, an amphitheater, perhaps a hotel, and certainly a cultural component. Albuquerque's point man for the project is Gabe Rivera of the city's Metropolitan Redevelopment Agency. He pointed with pride to the fact that this winter the master plan was awarded honorable mention in the Progressive Architecture (P/A) Awards from the American Institute of Architects. Said Rivera, "It has taken two years and a million dollars to get to this point — rehabilitating the Blacksmith Shop, doing essential roof repairs, reestablishing the water system." Another \$2 million is in the budget for 2015, and that will fund improvements to infrastructure that will gradually make more areas accessible for public use. The project is picking up momentum. The plan is on the agenda for partial city council review on May 14, and in June it will be presented to the full council.

The Blacksmith Shop is the only building in the Yards that has been reclaimed to a state where it can receive visitors. Completed in 1917, the brick-and-steel building is 76 feet wide and four times that in length, making it as long as a football field. Railroad tracks run like a spine down its center — that's how the train cars were moved in and out — and the soaring walls shimmer with a massive floor-to-ceiling patchwork of yellow, green, and clear glass panes. Albuquerque's mayor, Richard J. Berry, held a by-invitation event there last fall, but Chatter's concert will be the first presentation that is open to the public. Although Felberg is an Albuquerque native, he had not set foot inside the Rail Yards before he started planning this concert — at least almost not. "Well," he allowed, "I think I sneaked in once to take pictures. We're always looking for unusual and energetic spaces, and this has a tremendous energy. It's very beautiful how the light from the green and yellow windows makes patterns on the floor as the sun goes through. It's a very photogenic place. A lot of us would drive by and think how great it would be to do something in there."

The immediate neighborhood is not particularly inviting as one turns south on First Street from Central Avenue, at the Alvarado Transportation Center, and proceeds along blocks untouched by gentrification. In fact, you may have seen this barrio even if you didn't know it. A gritty triangle right across from the Rail Yards parking lot served as the location for a memorable scene in the second season of *Breaking Bad*, in which an 11-year-old boy circling on his bicycle assassinates the interloping drug dealer Combo (Rodney Rush). Rail Runner trains park alongside the Rail Yards, on tracks beyond the fence. "We understand that a train is scheduled to go by at 6:20," Felberg said, "and since our concert starts at five, I think we'll just make it." If they don't, he's prepared to accept it as "a Cageian moment," an unplanned interruption of sound that the composer John Cage would have considered profoundly beautiful.

The music for Chatter's program has been chosen with attention to the

space in which it will be heard. “Someone described Schnittke’s Concerto Grosso No. 1 as ‘post-apocalyptic,’” Felberg said. It was composed in 1977 — 13 years before the composer emigrated from the Soviet Union to Germany. “The concerto grosso was an old form, but Schnittke reappropriated it. He filled it with edgy rhythms and turned the old form into something for a new era. That reflects, in a way, what is happening with the development of the Yards.” (Bach’s beloved Concerto for Two Violins exemplifies the Baroque concerto grosso style that Schnittke used as a model. Violinist Ruxandra Marquardt will join Felberg in the solo parts.) A related idea is encapsulated in Pärt’s composition *Tabula Rasa*, also a product of 1977, a contemplative, 15-minute-long double concerto for two violins with prepared piano, harpsichord, and strings. “*Tabula Rasa* means ‘clean slate,’” Feldberg said, “and that echoes what the Blacksmith Shop has become — a place that has been reclaimed to the point where it is a clean slate, ready and waiting for something to happen. Pärt sounds great in big, open spaces. I remember an interview with him in which he said, ‘My music is just there to fill large spaces.’”

The building really is a clean slate. It is a handsome amalgam of industrial cool and haunted nostalgia, but it is empty. Everything for the event must be brought in: a raised stage large enough to accommodate 22 musicians, chairs for the 625 audience members (a limit that should ensure some degree of intimacy), a reception area for deep-pocketed patrons, a green room for the players, and even an area where local railroad enthusiasts will erect displays. Chatter’s board chair, Pamela Michaelis, has been busily coordinating all of this as well as getting requisite approvals from city agencies — all of it uncharted territory — which leaves Felberg free to concentrate on artistic matters. “Acoustics,” he said. “That is our primary concern right now.”

He removed his 1829 Vuillaume violin from its case and launched into the Bach concerto. Music filled the space, which somewhat resembles the nave of a very large church. But here there are no side chapels, no sculptures of saints, no pillars, no pews — none of the accouterments notorious for trapping sound in big churches and turning it into a clutter of echoes. Bach filled the Blacksmith Shop with focus and clarity, and even from the farthest corners the music sounded immediate, not needing any more force than Felberg would apply in a far more modest hall. “We would love to do more concerts here,” Felberg said. “For the moment, it’s a *tabula rasa*.” ◀

Chatter performs at the Albuquerque Rail Yards (800 Market Road S.W., at the intersection of First Street S.W. and Hazeldine Avenue S.W.) at 5 p.m. on Saturday, May 3. Tickets, \$15 to \$100 (which includes a reception), are reportedly scarce. Check Chatter’s website (www.chatterabq.org) for availability.