

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

COMMUNITY PROGRAMS OF THE ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY OFFER AUDIENCES AND MUSICIANS THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPERIENCE THE JOYS OF CHAMBER MUSIC.

BY EDDIE SILVA

The modern orchestra offers the joys of the macrocosm. Some 100 musicians fill grand concert halls with overwhelming sonic power. Even when an orchestra is at its most delicate and quiet, it is, in part, because of the forces that lie beneath the pianissimo that make such moments so captivating. An orchestra unleashed is a revelation.

Watching an orchestra create these sonic waves is to observe the small dramas that create all that sound. The frenzy of bows combined with the swift, subtle, precision of fingers pressuring strings—and all in synch—that alone is a phenomenon. But combined with percussion driving the rhythm, brass underscoring or highlighting a theme, winds singing above it all—and each section, each instrument, each individual musician within that 100 or so making it all cohesive, coherent, and, yes, beautiful—it becomes clear that the macrocosm is made up of microcosmic details.

Chamber music gives musicians and audiences the opportunity to more intensely experience such microcosmic activity. At an On Stage at Powell concert, for example, the audience may be only a few feet away from the ensemble. The silent communication between players, the heightened energy, even the sweat is evident. The power of chamber music is a revelation as well, if a more hushed and inward kind.

The musicians of the St. Louis Symphony are familiar with the unique joys of chamber music, and they are eager to re-discover and express those joys throughout the orchestral season. Through Community Programs, under the direction of Maureen Byrne, musicians are encouraged to form their own ensembles and select their own repertoire, and to step out from the macrocosm of the orchestra to perform on a more intimate scale. Byrne secures a complementary venue—whether it be a church or a synagogue, a senior center or a museum gallery, a historic building or a city park—and then delivers the concerts to St. Louis audiences for free.

Ann Fink, who joined the first violins of the Symphony in September, emphasizes the intimate aspect of chamber music. “It is really an intense experience,” she says. “In an orchestra you have a number of people playing



Thomas Jöstlein (left) and Tod Bowermaster playing dueling alphorns at the Jewel Box in Forest Park, part of the Landmarks Series.

the same part. In chamber music, only you are playing your part, but you also need to be in touch with the other musicians' parts. You need to communicate. It is the most intimate relationship you can have with other musicians. Without words you express the deepest feelings."

Thomas Jöstlein, Associate Principal Horn, enjoys the artistic freedom found in chamber ensembles. "In the orchestra we are passengers in the car being driven by the maestro, who chooses the program, the tempo, the dynamics, etc. In chamber ensembles we are the drivers. We plan and execute our trip on our own."

Jöstlein finds the St. Louis Symphony model for community concerts to be unique. "Community concerts are really a perk of the job, especially as Maureen facilitates them here. It's like extra artistic credit. It's very rare among orchestras. At other orchestras, chamber programs might be curated by others. Having carte blanche, or close to carte blanche, is very special."

"I've never played in an orchestra that has this varied an outreach pro-

Small Is Beautiful

gram,” says Diana Haskell, Associate Principal Clarinet. “We’re blessed by Maureen Byrne, who is open to our suggestions. She never puts ideas down. She’s open to our creativity. I get to play pieces I’d never get to play otherwise. I traveled to Truman State to play the Prokofiev Quintet in January. I hope to play John Adams’ *Gnarly Buttons*—somewhere, sometime—in the future.”

In the 2012-13 season Haskell performed Messiaen’s profound *Quartet for the End of Time* with Erin Schreiber, Alvin McCall, and Patti Wolf on a mini-tour of four religious centers as part of the *Symphony Where You Worship* program. “It was one of the best projects I’ve ever participated in,” Haskell recalls. “It was a chance to share one of the pinnacles of 20th-century literature, with a story that is so profound, even overwhelming. In these intimate spaces audiences could grasp what Messiaen was trying to portray. Many

“WITHOUT WORDS YOU EXPRESS THE
DEEPEST FEELINGS.”

—ANN FINK

people who had not been to the Symphony received an amazing introduction to classical music.”

This season, Byrne added a new Landmarks Series of concerts, featuring chamber ensembles in the Old Courthouse, the Jewel Box in Forest Park, the Saint Louis Art Museum, and the Science Center Planetarium. For Jöstlein, those intimate spaces are another perk of the job. “One of the real joys of community concerts is playing in spectacular venues, which inform the programming. The concept of space becomes important,” Jöstlein observes. “The space at Powell Hall calls for a full, lush orchestral sound. When I play at the Jewel Box in Forest Park, I’m inspired by nature, the flora and fauna in the space. So there I used nature-based sounds and instruments, including my alphorn.”

Give a musician an opportunity to play his alphorn, and you have a happy musician.

Chamber music opportunities also make for a better orchestra. “I like collaborating with people and exchanging ideas,” says first violinist Helen Kim. “It challenges me. It makes me a better musician. It heightens my sense of harmony. It inspires my musicianship.”

Orchestral playing is a highly collaborative enterprise, but in chamber music the collaboration intensifies, and opens other territories for musicians. “People’s personalities come through,” says Kim. “There might be someone really adamant about rhythmic accuracy; someone who wants to make sure phrases are cohesive. Someone is more prone to lead; someone is more prone to follow. You can learn what it is that people think about. People think differently than I do and I get new ideas all the time from the colleagues that I play with. I start thinking about things I may overlook, or perhaps give too much attention to. I’m given more things to explore.”



A chamber concert in the Old Courthouse, (clockwise from left) Jooyeon Kong, Helen Kim, David Kim, and Chris Tantillo.

“Playing chamber music teaches me to listen better,” says Haskell. “It teaches me to respond more quickly. An analogy might be a jockey on a horse—the smallest movement of the reins and the horse responds. It’s about achieving that sort of response time with a subtlety of approach. Paying such minute attention to detail in chamber ensembles effects how we react in the orchestra.”

The Symphony also forms more intimate relationships with the St. Louis community through chamber concerts. “It cannot be stressed enough the importance of the connections we make with audiences,” says Jöstlein. “They hear us from as close as five feet away. They talk to us after the concert, ask us questions.”

“It’s absolutely fantastic to be part of an orchestra that is so involved in community,” says Fink. “Our job is no longer just coming to work and playing. Becoming involved in the community is part of the work. Community concerts are as important as the orchestral concerts. It is a way for people to discover classical music in a setting that is less formal. And it’s free, which is a great way to get people to come and watch. We find new audiences to support the orchestra and classical music.”

Eddie Silva is the External Affairs and Publications Manager for the St. Louis Symphony.