

CROSSING OVER

WHEN ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY MUSICIANS ARE NOT IN POWELL HALL,
YOU MIGHT FIND THEM PLAYING SURPRISING MUSIC
IN SURPRISING PLACES.

BY STEFENE RUSSELL



LENI MANAA-HOPPENWORTH

Everybody tango! Cortango on stage

Several years ago, St. Louis Symphony Assistant Principal Viola Chris Woehr strolled by the Piper Palm House in Tower Grove Park. It was under renovation, and he noticed the hammer strikes sounded unusually resonant. He couldn't help himself: he stepped inside and sang a note. "I ran home, which was a block away, got my viola, and came back and played in there," he says. "And I said, 'this place has got to be a concert hall—it's just incredible, the acoustics.'" He and an early iteration of his band, Strings of Arda, played the ribbon cutting, adapting works by the six opera composers whose busts line the walls of the conservatory. "That, I guess, is the very beginning of our repertoire, just those six pieces for those six composers. But it's since expanded to hundreds," he says.

Strings of Arda's ranks are filled entirely with St. Louis Symphony musicians: Rebecca Boyer Hall, violin, plus a number of folk instruments; Asako Kuboki, violin; Alvin McCall, cello; Christopher Carson, double bass; and Thomas Stubbs, percussion. The ensemble's name comes from J.R.R. Tolkien's word for the world; in his mythology, it was created with musical tones. "I thought, what a great name for a group, because from the beginning, we got into playing world music," Woehr says. One of the first styles Woehr adapted was traditional Bosnian *sevda-linka* (the band performed some of those early arrangements last month at an

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On Stage at Powell concert, *Bosnian Journeys: Generations*), but the repertoire runs everywhere from Woehr's own compositions to five-minute tone poems to "a Japanese folk tune with strange ornamentation, even strange intervals," translated into the Western 12-note chromatic system. For the last five years, the band has performed a fall concert at the St. Louis Science Center Planetarium, with art beamed onto the ceiling. Last year's show, *Water Worlds: Earth to Europa and Beyond* featured an Ogallala Aquifer song, as well as the premiere of Woehr's *Ocean of Europa*. "I look at world music as music written on Earth," Woehr says. "That pretty much covers all music...and we pretty much play everything."

Cortango, on the other hand, is incredibly specific: it plays Argentine café and dance hall tango of the '30s, '40s, and '50s. The traditional *orquesta típica* is a sextet, two violins, piano, a double bass, and two *bandoneóns*, or concertinas. Cortango is a quartet, led by oboe and English horn (or cor anglais) player Caly Banham (she's the cor in Cortango). Her bandmates include violinist Asako Kuboki (also of Strings of Arda), double bassist David DeRiso, and pianist Adam De Sorigo, who sometimes sings—in Spanish, of course. "Putting the English horn and the oboe in there, this is not normal," Banham says, adding that her instrument often plays the vocal line, though she sometimes sings, too. "And we're symphony musicians. But at the same time, it's very important to me to try to emulate the authentic tango sound."

To that end, she's hired Julian Hasse, an Argentine *bandoneón* player, to arrange for the group. Banham first encountered tango as a dancer, and Cortango made its debut last May at a Tango St. Louis *milonga*, or open dance, in the Ritz-Carlton's ballroom. The band skews toward playing music for dancers, and Banham's goal is to release a CD by Thanksgiving 2015, custom-made to be played at *milongas*. When the symphony traveled to New York last November to perform Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* at Carnegie Hall, Cortango even played

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a *milonga* in Manhattan a few nights later, complete with rose-petal covered tabletops. But Cortango has also performed for non-dancers at Powell Hall and the Wine Press, and its repertoire is expanding to include contemporary music written for the concert hall, which Banham says gives the band more freedom. "We don't have to worry, if there's a big long violin solo that goes on for ever and ever, about a bunch of dancers being confused," she laughs. And yes, she would like to take the band to Buenos Aires someday. "People there so appreciate live music," she says. "I heard all kinds of different ensembles playing there. I even heard a couple of woodwind players on the street...so I think they would go for Cortango."

Multi-instrumentalist—piano, guitar, accordion, glockenspiel—Adam Maness of the Erin Bode Group has also arranged works for Cortango. But he's more

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SANDRA CALVO



The 442's

deeply involved with the 442's, along with his bandmate, bassist Sydney Rodway, and the Symphony's Shawn Weil, violin; and Bjorn Ranheim, cello.

"If you come to a symphony concert and the concertmaster walks out on stage, and he points to the oboe player, and they play an A for everyone to tune to, it's 442 Hz," Ranheim explains. "It also happens to be the street address of Syd, our bass player, whose wife is Erin Bode, the famous jazz singer." The band formed during monthly jam sessions at Rodway's house, which expanded into beer tastings, dinner parties, and collaborations with Bode. Though they all

sing; Ranheim was a boy soprano in his native Minneapolis.

"We're doing four-part male singing," he says. "We're all whistling; we're doing a lot of improvisation. Which is unusual for classical musicians, because that's not what we do—we are interpreters of music, and very rarely get encouraged to leap over and create on the spot." (Ranheim adds that his work in the 442's definitely sharpens his symphony playing, a sentiment shared by Banham and Woehr.) Rodway and Maness, for their part, are playing through-composed pieces, with Maness on folk instruments such as accordion, melodica, and glockenspiel, all unusual for jazz artists. Though the 442's were first inspired by *The Goat Rodeo Sessions*, a collaboration between Yo-Yo Ma, Stuart Duncan, Edgar Meyer, and Chris Thile of Nickel Creek, that's not the 442's sound. And it's not jazz, not classical. "We find ourselves saying 'It's not all of these things,'" Ranheim laughs. "We can't tell you what it is, but we can tell you what it's not."

Last winter, the band raised more than \$12,000 on Kickstarter to record a full-length album, to be released this May. They rented Shock City Studios for a week, and hired the Symphony's recording engineer, Paul Hennerich, to oversee the recording. "He really worked hard to get that acoustic quality, so we were all playing live," Ranheim says. "We didn't overdub a lot of stuff; we kept it very acoustic and real."

The band's 2012 debut EP, Ranheim says, no longer represents their current sound—a sound that's difficult to categorize. But that puts the 442's in the company of young symphony musicians around the country with impossible-to-define projects, including Brooklyn's Project Trio, which has a beatboxer in its ranks.

"It's indicative of this thing where you have these highly trained classical musicians who are of a generation where it's not enough to just play classical music," Ranheim says. "I listen to so many other things. I think we're trying to find a way to broaden the idea of what classical music can be, or what any music can be. It's an amazing time."

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