

N.Y. band brings alternative sound to N.J. students as classical music gets 21st-century makeover

By Ronnie Reich

NEW PROVIDENCE — Dorothy Lawson's long blond hair flailed around her smiling face while she dug her bow into her cello strings with walloping force, stomping her foot to a heavy blues beat.

Moments after the squealing and sputtering of an amplified string quartet had stopped filling the New Providence elementary school auditorium, third-graders stampeded toward the stage to beg Lawson to let them touch her shiny black cello, as though it were a rock star's prized guitar.

The budding groupies from the Allen W. Roberts Elementary School had questions for her.

"How do we find you on YouTube?"

"Are you popular on iTunes?"

"Do you know Miley Cyrus?"

Pop icon status — much less kid approval — usually doesn't come to classical musicians. But Lawson and her quartet, named ETHEL, aren't ordinary classical music types. ETHEL calls itself a band. And the group's recent visits to area schools were no ordinary music assemblies.

At a time when the centuries-old art form can use a dose of innovation, Lawson's New York-based band introduced the world of chamber music and symphonies to the under-18 set through invigorating performances of new, eclectic compositions.

The past few years have brought about the near-bankruptcy of the Philadelphia Orchestra, closings of other symphony orchestras and opera companies nationwide, and reduced seasons for many classical music presenters, including the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra and New York City Opera. Studies consistently show audiences are aging and decreasing.

Some say genre-bending concerts will be crucial to a live art form that young minds often associate with stiff formal wear and stuffy museums.

"The wonderful blending that's taking place is probably going to be the survival of a lot of genres, particularly classical," says Stephanie Hughley, founding vice president of programming for the New Jersey Performing Arts Center.

But will it sell tickets?

"Absolutely," she says.

"Mixing all this up is really good for all of us; that's audience development," she adds. "The potential is unlimited in terms of who will come now."

It's not a completely new idea. The long-established ensembles Kronos Quartet and Bang on a Can All-Stars have recorded and performed just about any style (using just about anything that makes a sound), from baroque standards to Mexican corridos, Steve Reich contemplations to Radiohead anthems. ETHEL — whose contemporary compositions draw on rock, blues, folk and world music — has been around for 15 years.

Classical's 21st-century makeover bears traces of hip-hop bravado, dance club bombast and blippy, laptop electronica. Music critic and composer Greg Sandow dubbed the phenomenon "alt-classical." Alt-classical adherents often appear in unconventional settings like clubs, bars and now schools and young people's concerts. It's not just ETHEL that's bringing alt-classical to student audiences.

CARNEGIE BREAKTHROUGH

DJ Mason Bates bent over his laptop on the stage of Carnegie Hall's 2,800-seat Stern Auditorium, pounding out throbbing, club-ready electronic beats against dramatically swelling

brass and undulating strings. Bright, abstract projections flashed across a video screen, shifting with the rhythms of Bates' music.

Joining Bates and a few dozen members of the Orchestra of St. Luke's on stage were classes from Englewood and Union, standing and peering over the shoulders of the musicians, admiring the trumpets and violins.

The concert, titled "The Orchestra Rocks!," was part of the Weill Music Institute's LinkUP! education outreach program.

Along with Bates' music, the orchestra played pieces written for the occasion by concert host Thomas Cabaniss — one with a part for kids to sing, one with a part for a drum line. The performance also included images of space to complement the action-movie-ready "Mars" excerpt from "The Planets," Gustav Holst's early-20th-century concert staple.

And yet, based on students' comments after the show, a clear favorite had emerged. Hipster-thin and in all black, Bates, 33, became a kind of classical idol for thousands of students during a three-day Carnegie Hall residency.

Bates is happy to see the enthusiasm. "Certainly it makes sense for children to be exposed to the classical war horses, since educational concerts are often kids' first encounter with orchestral music," he says, "but one of the risks of focusing on the tried-and-true is that kids start to see concert music as a museum piece. For those of us in the trenches of this wonderful field, it sure doesn't feel like we're frozen in a wax museum somewhere. We know that concert music is a live animal."

"Alt-classical junior" programming is just one new tactic being used to rejuvenate classical or concert music. It can't single-handedly squelch problems of cost, exclusivity, or competition from other art forms. What it can do is demystify classical music, address concerns of production values and build a bridge to more traditional classical concerts.

Jumping up and down with excitement after the Carnegie Hall performance, students said the event wasn't what they had expected.

"Classical music is slow," said Annie Langan, 10, a student from Washington Elementary School in Union. "This is different because it has a beat."

"Classical music is ... like jazz?" ventured Jamie Riberio, 9.

Bates says limited experience with classical music can turn people off.

"Friends of mine, people who are not really accustomed to all the rituals of a classical concert, find it so intimidating," he says. "Ways to get the information to folks would be fantastic."

He advocates pre-performance video shows, using projections like those at the Carnegie Hall concert, in place of bookish program notes.

Video's potential also appeals to Rossen Milanov, who led the Orchestra of St. Luke's in the performance. Still, Milanov, the music director of two New Jersey orchestras, recognizes classical music as a "boutique art" that will continue to reach a niche audience even as concert offerings become more diverse.

"We welcome absolutely everyone that wants to sample classical, but we also understand it requires a very special commitment and preparation and constancy," Milanov says. "It's not something that is going to bring enormous gratification by sampling once."

Even for those who spend a little time with classical music, it's not necessarily a smooth love affair.

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TOO COOL FOR SCHOOL?

At New Providence High School, another stop on ETHEL's tour, a student had scribbled "Orch Dorks Unite" on the music room blackboard. Not everyone was proud of the title. Sophie Lavine, an 18-year-old violinist, had picked up the instrument very young but quit and resisted its pull for several years "because I was too cool for it."

She is "all rock" despite her love of Mendelssohn, she said. Her friends from school don't listen to classical music, and she wouldn't bring them to concerts.

Something like ETHEL, though, maybe.

She was dressed in a black lace top and knee-high boots as she played alongside ETHEL in a classroom coaching session.

"All music has a stigma, like punk and hard-core," says Daniel Bernard Roumain, the composer and violinist known as DBR. "Classical music has an unfortunate stigma; the connotation is one where, you know, it's not the hippest bunch of old white people playing music by dead white men.

"It's not the whole picture, any more than rock music is long-haired hippies going crazy at very loud levels," adds DBR, 38, a Haitian-American with waist-long dreadlocks.

DBR makes a point of working with students as he tours the country. He is scheduled to bring his hip-hop-infused music to Newark next April.

The old/exclusive image of classical music is not totally unfounded. The most-performed concert composers fit DBR's description, and if classical music is becoming increasingly diverse, breaks from the old-white-male mold still make news.

There are changes, of course, with the rise of figures such as the charismatic Gustavo Dudamel — the 29-year-old Venezuelan conducting sensation who has breathed new energy into the classics as music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. An explosive performance by "the Dude" at NJPAC was a highlight of last season.

Programs like the Sphinx Commissioning Consortium bring music by black and Latino composers into concert halls; through it, a DBR work will be seen with the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra at NJPAC. And Black Violin, a duo that bridges hip-hop, R&B, jazz and classical, will give a family concert at the venue.

"It's up to classical musicians to redefine the tradition," says DBR.

CHANGE OF ATMOSPHERE

A vuvuzela-like chorus of hundreds of recorders roared through Carnegie Hall for a participatory segment of "The Orchestra Rocks!"

Students sang along during "In C" by Terry Riley — the inspiration for The Who's "Baba O'Riley."

During Bates' piece, the applause grew so loud that Milanov and company nearly lost their place in the music. So much for not clapping between movements.

"You're not used to that," says Milanov. "It felt more like rock and roll."

The classical concert atmosphere is beginning to change, and that was evident here. In place of tuxes and jackets, musicians dressed casually; a few who led the students had on bright yellow T-shirts.

As clothing conventions loosen on stage and in halls, musicians are also becoming more approachable through social media tie-ins and talks with audiences. Adding more familiarity are pops concerts, a tradition that has grown to encompass everything from country to video game soundtracks.

But it may be easiest to experiment with young audiences.

"With concerts designed for young people, there is no tradition there, so they are more open to receive variety than, let's say, a more-conservative established audience," Milanov says.

For those who do fall under its spell, alt-classical may provide a window into traditional concerts.

As Bates points out, the orchestra is everywhere: in movies, some pop music, on TV. And yes: Bates, ETHEL and DBR are on YouTube.

"It doesn't have to be in a classical concert with Beethoven 9 that a kid encounters an orchestra," Bates says. "You can access classical through a lot of different kinds of music."

He adds: "For some, the beat is the way in."

For Bates himself, the initial draw to orchestral music came from a much older genre-bender.

"If kids like that" — he says, referring to his own Carnegie Hall performance — "they should check out Gershwin. There are some amazing grooves in 'An American in Paris.'"