

A FEW YEARS AGO, I was on a plane chatting with the woman next to me. I told her I lived in Philadelphia. “Great music town,” she replied. I smiled. Philadelphia’s reputation as a destination for music has existed for over a hundred years, and it keeps getting better. Since 2000, new presenting organizations have cropped up across the region, including Lifeline Music Coalition, Ars Nova Workshop, Sound Field, Bowerbird, Chamber Music Now, and Peregrine Arts. These emerging presenters are offering an unprecedented breadth of jazz, experimental music, contemporary chamber music, and genre-melding multimedia productions this season and beyond. These organizations not only present daring concerts, but also innovate on the very idea of what it means to present music, making now a great time to be listening in on Philadelphia.

Lifeline Music Coalition’s Artistic and Executive Directors, Warren Oree and Graziella D’Amelio, form a constantly evolving pair of jazz advocates. Previously known as Spotted Bushes Entertainment and producers of the 2003 Philadelphia Jazz and Poetry Festival, they were approached that year by Jack Kitchen, Executive Director of the Ogontz Avenue Revitalization Corporation (OARC). Kitchen and the OARC wanted to bring attention to the good things happening in the neighborhood of West Oak Lane, and the 7100 to 7200 blocks of Ogontz Avenue in particular. The OARC had already been sponsoring an annual one-day community event, but Kitchen had a hunch that an enlarged street festival would be a real benefit.

Starting in 2004, Oree and D’Amelio produced the West Oak Lane Jazz and Arts Festival. They’re currently planning 2007’s festival, scheduled for June 22 through 24. Its first year, the free festival spanned two outdoor stages and additional venues, and attracted about 5,000 people. In 2005, Lifeline Music Coalition doubled the stages, brought in special guest Roy Ayers, and drew an astounding 100,000 attendees. Despite a rainy weekend in 2006, the numbers grew again to over 150,000 people.

The West Oak Lane Jazz and Arts Festival employs, as they put it, “99.99% professional Philly area artists.” Oree is one such musician; a busy bassist, his own group is the Arpeggio Jazz Ensemble. His connections to the Philadelphia jazz community are strong and deep, and he has been quick to recognize the largely unknown talent in the region. He and D’Amelio describe the “cats” as, “An eclectic mix of musicians and

Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) Award for Adventurous Programming. Clearly, Christman is doing something right.

Ars Nova Workshop’s history shows a particular affinity for Free Jazz, in its many frenetic guises, as well as New York’s Downtown and “post-loft” scenes. Christman affirms, “I believe that the contemporary practices of Anthony Braxton, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, and others are just as important and rigorous as they were forty years ago. And I’m interested in emerging work that reflects that relevance and rigor.” At the International House last season, ANW presented Anthony Braxton and fellow “elder-statesmen” of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, Inc. (AACM), an important organization founded in 1965 by avant-garde musicians centered in Chicago. This season at International House, he’s working on a series of concerts called “Seraphic Light” celebrating local hero and jazz über-icon John Coltrane. Cecil Taylor will be performing as part of the series on November 4th. One of

tending to. When he moved to the region a few years ago, composer and clarinetist Gene Coleman brought his presenting platform, Sound Field, with him from Chicago. Coleman had already been producing concerts for over a decade, including the first major presentation of German composer Helmut Lachenmann’s work in the United States, when in 2000 he recognized the opportunity to bring together several musical events happening that season under the banner of a festival. When the festival was received well by the media, Coleman kept at it and continues to produce an annual festival, co-operating with seven or eight venues per year. Though he has left the area, the relationships he has built, as well as the reputation of the festival, motivates him to keep presenting concerts in Chicago. He has also launched a third Sound Field festival in San Francisco.

Over the past two seasons, Sound Field partnered with the Slought Foundation, a theory-minded art space at 40th and Walnut Streets, for its Philadelphia series. While

ing with musicians who are interested in the “ongoing definitions of what is music.”

To that end, he invites musicians from around the world compelled by this style of experimentation to collaborate with him in the Sound Field festivals. Japanese guitarist Kazuhisa Uchihashi, joint American/Swedish cellist Helena Espvall, and Lebanese/French saxophonist Christine Sehnaoui performed with Coleman in his first Philadelphia concert this season. Then it was “What is the Sound of China?” featuring Coleman’s Ensemble Noamnesia with guests Chao-Ming Tung, a composer and *guzheng* player from Taiwan; Wu Wei, a *sheng* player from China, and Hong Wang, a *huqin* player and the director of Melody of China in San Francisco. At the end of October, Sound Field will present two concerts that pair Coleman’s group of American and Japanese performers, Ensemble N JP with, respectively, three local dancers (including PMP’s own Emily Sweeney) and the 1926 film *A Page of Madness*, directed by Teinosuke Kinugasa.

21st

Century Presenters: The Changing Face of Philadelphia’s Music Scene

BY ALYSSA TIMIN

vocalists who seem to get more work and recognition outside of Philly and the country.” They continue, “Many of the musicians in Philly are highly regarded in Europe, Asia, South America, etc., and find it difficult to get steady work in Philly. The artists are as well-known as Odean Pope and the Sun Ra Arkestra, and as obscure as Kenny Gates and Rob Henderson, but they are equally talented and seasoned. LMC has made it a mission and priority to provide them with opportunities — especially high profile gigs.”

In 2006, LMC brought Ayers back, as well as WAR and Joey DeFrancesco, to round out the solid roster of area players. They have also partnered with various entities such as *Jazz Times*, the Greater Philadelphia Tourism and Marketing Corporation (GPTMC), the Multicultural Affairs Congress (MAC), and the *Daily News* to, for example, make the festival accessible to tourists by providing shuttle service to and from the Independence Visitors Center.

Now that the West Oak Lane Festival is up and running, LMC is looking at other projects and collaborations to pursue. They have worked with the music education non-profit and sometimes-presenter Musicopia (once Strings for Schools), and for the 2007-2008 season, they’re planning to work with both the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Longwood Gardens. Likewise, they’re in conversation regarding both a documentary on jazz and a project with Jazz in the Planetarium. These tireless individuals who like their jazz “honest and from the heart” hope to help keep innovative music at the forefront of Philadelphia’s scene and show the world the quality of performance that thrives in the city.

Jazz has an equally driving force in Ars Nova Workshop (ANW) and its Director, Mark Christman. Christman got interested in “the business side of music” early in his college career while he acted as default manager of his band. After taking “frequent excursions” up to New York to see acts he was interested in, he detected an opportunity to make more of what he was interested in happen in Philadelphia. In 2000, Christman took it upon himself to foster “organized support” of improvised music. Crowned Best Jazz Series in 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2005 by the *Philadelphia City Paper*, ANW has been responsible for more than 200 avant-garde performances since its inception, and was also recently awarded an American Society of



Christman’s biggest concerts of the season, on February 10th, 2007, will feature the Rova Saxophone Quartet in a performance of Coltrane’s rarely-performed *Ascension*.

In addition to International House, ANW works with numerous other venues concentrated in West Philadelphia. The presenter has ongoing partnerships with the University of Pennsylvania and the Community Education Center (CEC). “Continually providing appropriate spaces for this music is particularly difficult,” Christman confesses. “But,” he adds, “partnerships are key, and I hope to continue building new and unique ones in and outside of Philadelphia.” With reassuring ambition, Christman looks ahead to possibilities on Ars Nova Workshop’s horizon: new partnerships, new series, commissions... In the meantime, Philadelphia concertgoers have ready access to some of the most gratifying improvisational performers, diverse and passionate audiences, and affordable tickets around.

West Philly has helped spawn additional presenters of improvised music worth at-

he enjoys presenting concerts at Slought, Coleman says, he wants to branch out. In all cities, Sound Field operates between the various venues and organizations that host its concerts. Venues, he adds, “...are a very important connective element. This is one of the next steps for us.” This year, Coleman will add the CEC and International House to his repertoire of collaborating venues.

As a composer, performer, and presenter, Coleman focuses on bridging musical and cultural categories. His interests combine notated and improvised music, conventional and extended technique, disciplines external to music — especially dance and film — and, perhaps most importantly, the many musical systems beyond the West. Coleman’s practice attempts to create common ground among these multiplicities, not only within the vocabulary of his compositions, but between musicians as well. “A big premise of Sound Field is to create linkages between these areas of practice,” he comments. He’s committed to presenting and collaborat-

“My philosophy is that I’m a composer,” Coleman says. “I’m also, in a way, an entrepreneur. Those things are all commingled for me.” Deeply aware of the limitations composers accept in their traditional separation from the presenting process, Sound Field is Coleman’s way of taking action. “If composers are going to have any kind of sustainable practice outside of universities,” he says, “my model has to be one of the ones they consider. You can’t just sit around and wait for people to call you.” Coleman plans to develop Sound Field in the 2007 season by articulating four of the strands that he believes have been growing within the series over time. One category, “Eurethos,” will identify the ongoing influence of European aesthetics on American culture. The second, “Transonic,” will feature cross-cultural programs involving East Asian traditions. “Crosswork” will name the multi-discipline performances, and “American Independents” will take on individual composers, beginning with Alvin Curran.

Along with Ars Nova Workshop and Sound

Field, a third, even more recent and more grassroots presenting organization contributes to the rising presence of experimental music in the city. Dustin Hurt founded Bowerbird just in February 2006. Hurt had been a longtime listener of iconic modern composers like Morton Feldman, Iannis Xenakis, and Pierre Boulez, though he felt their music had been “relegated to the universities.” In the autumn of 2005, Hurt started attending a series called Good Fridays at the Philadelphia Record Exchange. The series, organized by active experimental musician Eugene Lew, is now defunct. However, Hurt says, “The music I saw that night was in many ways my first introduction into another world of sounds and a whole ‘underground’ scene of music... It was dissonant and complex, challenging and unusual, but driven by the artists. It seemed vital and essential and not lofty and untouchable as music in concert halls.”

Hurt got more acquainted with the burgeoning experimental scene in West Philadelphia. Ars Nova Workshop and Sound Field,



it appears, are the tip of an electro-acoustic iceberg that extends into the neighborhood’s “DIY [Do It Yourself] house show culture” through spaces including, for example, the Avant Gentlemen’s Lodge. At a winter solstice show at the “Lodge,” Hurt saw double bassist Evan Lipson perform a Hans Werner Henze work and receive as much wild applause as the indie rock bands playing before him. To Hurt, the event proved that young audiences were ready and willing to hear complex music. With the aid of Rich Wexler, director of Sherman Arts and West Philadelphia event promoter, Hurt presented his first concerts at the Green Line Café and the independent record and comic book store, the Marvelous.

From there, Bowerbird took off. “Over the next eight months,” Hurt says, “Bowerbird presented 40 concerts of music, with over 150 sets of music (including six world premieres), more than 200 musicians from all over the U.S., Europe, Japan, and Lebanon, at almost 20 different venues.” This fall, the presenter has moved to increase the amount of composed

music it programs. Hurt is also transforming the organization into a collective. “The collective,” he explains, “is an effort to, one, spread the work around, two, give key people a greater voice in the direction and mission of Bowerbird, and, three, create a situation of sustainability by avoiding burnout and over-commitment by any one individual.” More than 20 people are currently sharing responsibility for facilitating and promoting Bowerbird events, while Hurt manages curatorial and administrative decisions. He plans to maintain a “strong guiding hand” regardless of the collectivity’s ultimate shape.

Bowerbird hosts events in venues, especially art galleries, across the city. While West Philadelphia persists as an important foundation for Bowerbird’s activities, Hurt puts “considerable effort” into programming elsewhere. West of the Schuylkill, venues include the Rotunda, Community Education Center, LAVA (Lancaster Avenue Autonomous space), and AIRSPACE. On the second Saturday of each month, there’s a Bowerbird show at the Satellite Café. In South Philadelphia, Bowerbird has shows at the Pageant: Soloveev Gallery; in Old City, they program at the Nexus Foundation; in Kensington at the Mascher Space Cooperative, and in Center City, at the Broad Street Ministry. The largest-scaled event of the season will be a four-day festival of experimental music, held at the Rotunda from May 3 through 6, 2007.

Though Hurt and Bowerbird are just getting going, his great ambition is to help make Philadelphia “the definitive metropolitan area for experimental culture.” Steps along the way will include incorporating as a non-profit and increasing the organization’s visibility. “Bowerbird ultimately strives to improve the artistic lives of the individuals it serves,” Hurt emphasizes. That means both creating performing opportunities for local artists and bringing in “exceptional talent” from other regions, as well as coordinating with fellow organizations such as ANW and Sound Field to avoid schedule conflicts and create cooperation, rather than competition, among the different presenters. Hurt sees Bowerbird as a way to organize musicians at all stages of their careers and build a network of support while refusing to compromise the “often challenging nature of the work it exhibits.” These interconnected organizations can’t help but bring an unprecedented degree of vitality to the city’s experimental music.

Back across in Center City, another up-and-coming presenter is taking a differ-

ent angle on bringing innovative music to Philadelphians. Two local composers, Richard Belcastro and David Laganella, are heading up Chamber Music Now (CMN), an organization that concentrates on commissioning adventurous composers, hosting talented young performers, and having fun in the meantime. “As active composers,” says Belcastro, “we’ve developed close relationships with peer artists.” CMN presents a series of concerts each season that reinvigorates the new music community with surprising performances by promising local, national, and international talent.

Belcastro and Laganella share responsibility for the organization and choose to include one new work of each of theirs per season. They seek out composers and performers open to collaboration and the wider dialogue of formal innovation. However, Belcastro qualifies, “We are focused first and foremost on the quality of our programming.” In addition to balancing the drives toward both consistent quality and adventurous attitudes, the two directors enjoy bringing chamber music down



to earth. “David and I often joke about not being your typical classical musicians. I’m sure not many other Philadelphia classical music groups work their meetings in around the Eagles season or negotiate with artists at the local pub,” says Belcastro. Like others, CMN appears eager to affirm the relevance of chamber music outside academic contexts.

In 2005 to 2006, CMN’s season took inspiration from rock and pop music. With concerts loosely based around, for example, Led Zepelin and the electronic music genre of drum n bass, CMN began to explore the work of younger musicians who have been equally inspired by Stravinsky, George Crumb, and Radiohead. Local laptop artist — and winner of the 2005 North American Laptop Battle — Starkey, aka Paul Geissinger, has contributed opening sets to multiple concerts. Their final concert in the upcoming season, which will be hosted at the Annenberg Center in May through its Philadelphia Presenting Project, pairs four local composers with four local filmmakers to produce a sort of cubist appre-

ciation of the city of Philadelphia. Composers Belcastro, Geissinger, Andrea Clearfield and David Ludwig are matched with filmmakers Deron Albright, Can Yegen, Ed Feldman, and Chris Garvin. Each work shares a common structure of film, electronic sound, and live cello, performed by cellist Ovidiu Marinescu.

CMN is equally excited about the other concerts planned for this season. In September they hosted the Serafin Quartet for a program that featured works by American composers influenced by jazz and blues. November will bring the New York ensemble Flexible Music for a program including music by Louis Andriessen and Nico Muhly. In February, pianist and CMN favorite Marilyn Nonken will offer a program of socially minded music, including Frederic Rzewski’s *The People Will Never Be Defeated* and premieres by emerging composers Laurie San Martin and Yu-Hui Chang. Together, the concerts comprise an eclectic sampling of contemporary chamber music unlikely to arrive in the city by other means. They also



represent the exuberant force of young composers and musicians in the life of new music.

Also emerging within the new music community, Peregrine Arts is positioning itself as a specialized presenter of complex, often multimedia projects. Thaddeus Squire founded Peregrine after he left his role of executive director with the ensemble Relâche. In addition to managing the group, he had “found an opportunity for curatorial direction” and developed an interest in the dynamic processes of building non-profit arts organizations. At the same time, Squire felt frustrated with the traditional shape of careers in composition and conducting. When he moved on from Relâche, Squire dedicated himself to tailoring his own organization in a way that would allow him to both pursue the projects that interested him and create a new model within the field.

Squire refers to a number of insights that he hopes will guide Peregrine. One is the importance of maintaining a scale of operation that’s appropriate for an organization.

A small or “boutique” organization can hold different expectations about audience size or visibility than a large organization. As Squire puts it, all organizations have a “horizon of value.” He hopes to build Peregrine’s by presenting and producing interdisciplinary projects that will appeal to different segments of audiences. He believes that moving to a “project-based model,” rather than a generic or discipline-specific model, will breathe flexibility into Peregrine. Squire points out that in the traditional organizational model, variety is the currency through which seasons or series are promoted. Instead, he aims to build interest in a “lower volume” of “larger, thorny, exceptional projects that find an uneasy home elsewhere.”

Squire works closely with the artists creating the projects he presents and offers significant contributions to the development of the works. Ultimately, he aims for a “deep co-ownership” of each project, as well as “a certain degree of sustainability”: these projects, he argues, should be able to be perpetuated in further forms, whether as a tour, or a kind of franchise. In general, he pursues “a business logic that I think makes sense,” generating investment in the life of the project on both organizational and artistic sides. He sees himself as reinvigorating and perhaps redeeming the role of the producer, in which Squire can facilitate artists’ personal visions and create intelligent collaborations among musicians and other performers.

In an important sense, presenting is only the most public aspect of Peregrine, through which, over the course of the next four years, Squire plans to cultivate producing, consulting, and research practices. Each year, he plans to host an Expo for Peregrine in which he can explain what’s new and showcase artists with whom he’s working. These days, he is primarily laboring behind the scenes to bring projects that are mid-process to fruition. Late last season, Peregrine presented two performances: *Locus Solus*, a site-specific work based on the novel by Raymond Roussel with composer Phil Kline, vocalist Theo Bleckmann, and violinist Todd Reynolds at the Ryerss Museum and Library, and *Deadly She-Wolf Assassin at Armageddon*, a “martial arts music-theater spectacle” that combines a drama of murder and revenge with composer Fred Ho’s signature Afro-Asian jazz.

This season, Peregrine is working with Temple University’s Boyer College of Music and Dance to produce an involved series of concerts and master-classes in March. Fred Ho will return to present *The Black Panther*

Suite: All Power to the People! Electronic musician Robin Rimbaud, aka Scanner, will present a new work at the Wagner Free Institute of Science, and the Ridge Theater will offer a new version of British composer Gavin Bryars’s work, *The Sinking of the Titanic*. Additional concerts by the GlauX Ensemble, the Momenta String Quartet, and Temple faculty and students will complement these large-scale performances.

Peregrine is in the process of developing other exciting projects for further seasons: in Spring 2008, *Who Killed Erdnase?*, a new music-theater work by the Ridge Theater and Gavin Bryars team in conjunction with author Glen David Gold; also in Spring 2008, a continuation of Ho’s martial arts epics in *Dragon vs. Eagle*, and, in Spring 2009, *Hidden City*, a “one-month festival-exhibition that will rediscover and reinterpret Philadelphia’s ‘hidden’ cityscape by re-animating obscured, endangered and normally inaccessible heritage sites through contemporary art installations.” This stupendously ambitious project will involve both international artistic and regional historical professionals working in dozens of sites across the city.

The energy and excitement buzzing from the efforts of Peregrine Arts, Lifeline Music Coalition, Ars Nova Workshop, Sound Field, Bowerbird, and Chamber Music Now create a powerful sense of how much lies ahead for Philadelphia’s music and wider arts community. From warehouse spaces to university classrooms to revitalized neighborhoods to the common concert hall, musicians are transforming old boundaries into new beauty, stale antagonisms into refreshing conversation, and persistent obstacles into enlightening opportunities. The determined and optimistic attitude within the city’s most recent swell of presenters offers a great boon to concertgoers eager for harmonies they’ve never heard before.

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Page 23, left to right: Gene Coleman, artistic director of SoundField; Mark Christman, director of Ars Nova Workshop, with composer and musician Anthony Braxton; Richard Belcastro, executive director of Chamber Music Now

Page 22, left to right: Bowerbird posters; Thaddeus Squire, artistic and producing director of Peregrine Arts; Warren Oree and Graziella D’Amelio of Lifeline Music Coalition