



CHAMBER

The Next (Not-So-)Big Thing

New chamber orchestras are popping up all over America.

By Colin Eatock

IT'S NO SECRET that these are tough times for America's symphony orchestras. News from the classical-music world features grim accounts of orchestras struggling with deficits, seeking bankruptcy protection and even going out of business. In this harsh environment, the idea of starting a new orchestra might seem like sheer folly. And indeed, it might well be unwise to launch an orchestra modeled after the large, traditionally structured ensembles.

And yet a certain kind of new orchestra is thriving. Chamber orchestras — smaller, more flexible and often more innovative than big symphony orchestras — are sprouting up all over the United States. According to the League of American Orchestras, more than thirty have been founded since the year 2000.

This new breed of chamber orchestra tends to be the creation of one person with a

dream. Administrative staff ranges from small to nonexistent, and some ensembles don't even have boards of trustees. The players tend to be on the young side, eager, talented and temperamentally suited to a freelance lifestyle. Generally, there are no formal auditions to join one of these bands; players are recruited on a who-knows-who basis.

These groups are also usually based in cities that already have well-established symphony orchestras — so they're mindful of local "turf" issues, setting up shop a polite distance from flagship concert halls and performing-arts centers or moving around from one area to another.

Finally, they are all looking for ways to renovate the concertgoing experience and are willing to experiment — with new repertoire, unusual concert venues, informal

presentation and a variety of audience-friendly initiatives.

Below, we offer a look at three American chamber orchestras all less than a decade old. For these ensembles, the label "chamber orchestra" isn't an apology, it's a badge of honor: they don't want to be bigger than they are. And the word "chamber" is the key to their identity. Often, they're run more like small chamber groups expanded to modest orchestral proportions than full-scale orchestras shrunk down. For (almost) everyone involved, these ensembles aren't a full-time job; they're a labor of love.

KNICKERBOCKER CHAMBER ORCHESTRA Manhattan Island is surely one of the most orchestra-intense places on the planet — so why would anybody start another there? Yet

Scaling down to ramp up. The Knickerbocker Chamber Orchestra has ensured continued success by holding fundraisers — as soirees — in private homes.



There's a happy noise. The River Oaks Chamber Orchestra at Houston's Museum of Fine Arts

that's exactly what conductor-composer Gary Fagin did when he founded the Knickerbocker Chamber Orchestra.

"There are some extraordinary classical-music organizations in New York City," he readily acknowledges, "but they don't really have a presence downtown. My initial impetus was to create a classical-music presence in Lower Manhattan, which has the fastest-growing residential population in New York."

For four years the KCO has been performing in the Financial District, attracting audiences from the local community and commuters who work in the area. For Fagin, serving this specific part of the city is central to his mission: he's not interested in taking his orchestra uptown to Lincoln Center or finding his way to Carnegie Hall.

He likes to take a long view of things, pointing out that New York's first theater district was on Broadway between Battery Park and City Hall, some fifty blocks south of its currently location. "The great performing venues were down here," Fagin points out, "including Castle Clinton, where Jenny Lind performed in the 1850s. So there's a history of culture in this part of the city." He also likes to create programs that invoke the spirit of Lower Manhattan — such as a commemoration of the arrival of Henry

Hudson in New York Harbor four hundred years ago, or the one hundred twenty-fifth anniversary of the Statue of Liberty.

But the theaters and concert halls of Lower Manhattan are long gone, and finding suitable digs for orchestral concerts in the heart of the Financial District required some ingenuity. "I must have looked at forty or fifty different spaces," he says. "And there are some incredible public spaces downtown — but only a few that are acoustically appropriate for an orchestra." So rather than settling on a specific venue, the KCO became an itinerant ensemble, playing at the World Financial Center's palmy Winter Garden, at Trinity Church on Wall Street and at Pace University's Schimmel Center for the Arts, among others.

As for finding his musicians, Fagin knew just where to look. "I've been involved in the music scene in New York for thirty years or so," he says. "I have a background in theater — and a real appreciation for those musicians who have classical training but make their living playing in Broadway theater pits. We have a wonderful core of people who have a very broad versatility."

At its largest, the KCO is a thirty-three-piece ensemble — with strings, woodwinds and brass — though it can also be a string group of one to two dozen. The orchestra also

sends chamber quartets and quintets to do school programs.

Fagin has a board of directors in place, but only one staff member and no office. "We've spent so much of our time raising money for our concerts," he explains, "that our infrastructure isn't yet developed." But lack of infrastructure hasn't stopped him from presenting about three concerts a year — carving out a place for classical music among the office towers of Lower Manhattan.

RIVER OAKS CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

River Oaks is an upscale Houston neighborhood known for its stately homes amid expansive lawns and tree-lined boulevards. And for the last seven years, it's been home to the thriving River Oaks Chamber Orchestra.

When oboist Alecia Lawyer founded the ensemble, she first thought of calling it the Why Not Orchestra. "Why not have a five o'clock concert?" she asks rhetorically. "Why not have child care and music education? We can try new things without really changing what an orchestra is all about."

Lawyer has lived in Houston since 1996. When she discovered the Church of St. John the Divine in River Oaks — a large and elegantly modern building with fine acoustics — she knew she'd found the perfect place to launch a chamber orchestra. She started big, by chamber orchestra standards: with forty players, some Houston-based and some flown in from around the country.

This season ROCO is presenting twenty concerts, but only five are at St. John the Divine. The rest are in a brewery, a zoo, a hotel, a university, a different church, and several art galleries and museums.

"We have lots of different series," notes Lawyer. "We want each section inside the orchestra to have its own personality and culture. So we have a string quartet series, a brass quintet and recital series. It looks scattershot, but it's actually very purposeful. We're finding ways for people to enter into a relationship with the musicians, so when they come to our big concerts they'll know the people on stage."



Bright ideas. Traction Avenue Chamber Orchestra performs in a downtown Los Angeles loft.

The orchestra has an active commissioning program for new works. It also has all the concerto soloists it could ever want within its own ranks. What ROCO doesn't have, however, is a permanent conductor. These are hired on an ad-hoc basis — and have included JoAnn Falletta and Edwin Outwater — or are dispensed with altogether for conductorless concerts. While repertoire decisions ultimately lie with Lawyer, she actively polls her players for suggestions and is quick to praise their versatility and propensity for new ideas. “We need musicians,” she explains, “who can perform a concerto, play in the orchestra and then do a recital — all in the same week.” For this reason, she has deliberately set aside standard “blind” audition procedures, preferring to handpick her musicians. “Auditions aren't organic,” she claims. “You wouldn't marry someone by listening to an audition behind a screen, would you?”

TRACTION AVENUE CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

Traction Avenue is a main artery of the Los Angeles arts district, an edgy neighborhood where old warehouse buildings have been converted into studio lofts. This is where violinist-composer-conductor Ali Helnwein established the Traction Avenue Chamber

Orchestra. So far, his motivating hunch — that a new kind of orchestra would attract a new kind of audience — has been validated.

“When I talk to young people,” says Helnwein — who himself is not quite thirty — “many will say they're interested in classical music and would love to go out to concerts. But they never end up doing it. So I started this orchestra as an experiment, to go and play in the places where they do hang out.”

Helnwein did just that: his orchestra played its first concert at a skateboarding park and has played on rooftops and in alleyways. He's also taken his orchestra indoors — to art galleries, a circus school and even the Herbert Zipper Concert Hall (home of the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra).

There's an ephemeral, impromptu quality to this ensemble; concerts are planned on a one-off, ad-hoc basis. But the Traction Avenue Chamber Orchestra has found traction: it's now in its sixth year, presenting four or five concerts per year.

There's no staff or board of directors yet — and Helnwein does most of the organizational work himself. But he's quick to share artistic credit with others in the ensemble. “I run it,” he says, “and I end up making the final decisions. But what I like about the orchestra

is that it's a collaborative experience, a small group of musicians who are passionate about what they do. I do always ask for input from them, for ideas on repertoire and places to play.”

As for that repertoire, there's been a strong Baroque leaning in the music Helnwein puts on the music stands. But he's also attracted to new works. “More recently,” he says, “we've been featuring contemporary local composers. There are a lot of composers in L.A., and I'm interested in what they're doing. Also, the audience responds to new music surprisingly well. You'd think they'd prefer the traditional repertoire, but some people respond well to the most atonal piece on the program.”

VIVE LA DIFFÉRENCE

These are just three of the numerous start-up chamber orchestras that dot the musical landscape. Though they have many common attributes, it would be rash to draw too many general conclusions or to assume they represent anyone but themselves; each new orchestra exists as a response to place-and-time-specific resources and opportunities. And for every generalization, there are exceptions.

For instance, although many new chamber orchestras do not hold traditional auditions, the Chamber Orchestra of New York is a fully auditioned ensemble that plays in major halls — including Zankel Hall and Merkin Hall — as well as other Manhattan venues. While some new ensembles hope to build a paying audience, CityMusic Cleveland is committed to presenting free concerts. Some groups, like the Arcos Orchestra and the Knights (both based in New York), have permanent conductors, while Boston's A Far Cry is proudly conductorless. And new chamber orchestras aren't necessarily located in big cities: the Heartland Festival Orchestra, established two years ago, plays in an auditorium on the outskirts of Peoria, Illinois.

Still, while there may be no cookie-cutter formula at work here and while they themselves may not realize it (they are often unaware of each others' existence), all of these orchestras are part of a trend — possibly even a movement. ■