



# Classic With a Twist

Today's world-class classical musicians find themselves performing outside of concert halls more and more, serving up traditional music in some very untraditional ways. Four such locals—all dedicated to broadening the reach of the music they love—recently joined *The Improper* at one unconventional concert venue, Aeronaut Brewery, to chat about what ditching the tuxedo means for classical music as we know it.

BY SARAH HAGMAN | PHOTOGRAPHED BY DIEGO NAVARRO



JENNIFER MONTBACH



KEITH KIRCHOFF



EZRA WELLER



DAVE TARANTINO

**We're on Original Gravity's home turf, Keith. Your series pairs new music with drinks from local brewers. How does relaxing a concert's atmosphere change the experience for audience members?**

**Keith Kirchoff** (*artistic director of Original Gravity*): Traditionally in a jazz concert, you were sitting there with your beer or your cocktail. It just immediately induces this sort of relaxed atmosphere, and I think that you listen better. For Original Gravity, I liked the idea of pairing the beverage with the music so that it's not a background thing. It's not, have a beer

while you're listening to music, or we're here at dinner and there's some background music playing. These are actually equal things. To me, jazz had always had that sort of image where it was OK to do that.

**Jennifer Montbach** (*oboist and artistic director of Radius Ensemble*): We need to give props to jazz for retaining some of those aspects, not only eating but also connecting with the performers, where you'd clap after a great solo or between movements, which historically was part of classical music too.

**KK:** In the modern-day traditional classical performance, you're scowled

at if you're clapping after a movement. If you love something, if somebody just dazzled you with some great passage, why not clap?

**JM:** And if something is transcendent, you should be able to sit there for a moment and take it in without feeling like, "Oh, it's time to clap."

**Dave Tarantino** (*percussionist with Phoenix orchestra*): People say, "Oh, you can go to the Boston Pops and have food and watch a concert." The Pops are great obviously, but just the fact that it's the Pops, it's kind of pandering to "Here's some popular music because you don't like what we

normally do." And to me, that's kind of twisted to frame it like that...

**JM:** You shouldn't only be allowed to have food when the trumpet players are wearing Santa hats.

**The audience for classical music is there—you don't need to change the music. What are some changes you're making to get people in the door?**

**DT:** One is breaking down the barrier between the floor and the stage, so there's not musicians onstage wearing tuxedos and then the audience. Removing the fourth wall with a small

group is easier, but with a larger group it allows more interaction.

**KK:** It gives people the chance to talk to the musicians as well. If there's something that they're curious about, the musicians—and perhaps the composers—are right there. You can just go up and chat with them and realize that they're totally normal people, so it kind of breaks down that barrier as well.

**JM:** People want to experience their music the way they experience other art forms. They want to know the performers. Why do we buy celebrity magazines and watch reality TV?

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**Ezra Weller** (*COO of Groupmuse*): It's nice to have the performance of classical music turn a little bit back into the practice of other music. For example, there's a Groupmuse violinist who comes in and he doesn't know what he's going to play, which is something a folk singer could do, but the music we're playing is not exactly like folk music. It follows different rules. There's a seriousness to Beethoven, and that's not a bad thing. And it's also not the thing that prevents

it from having a place today. It might be true that the most popular things are never going to be super serious. It may be true that comedy movies can always be a bigger blockbuster than very serious ones. But *12 Years a Slave* can still be a popular movie.

**JM:** For any other art form, no one would say, "If you like beef bourguignon, you can't have pizza." Right? Not to suggest that one's better than the other, but you can have varied tastes. This whole issue of seriousness is a tricky semantic one, and we want to be careful to retain that respect and seriousness and tradition.

**EW:** We do nothing to make a Groupmuse a serious thing, but when everybody comes together and sits

by segregating it to its own types of concert series and events. I think there is an audience for capital C classical music that also craves new music. They may not realize it; they may need it explained to them a little bit more. There is this whole idea that music has been corner-stoned, but they're really all part of a continuing spectrum. They inform each other. So when you hear Beethoven next to a contemporary composer, you may understand that music better than if you just heard it isolated.

**KK:** With Original Gravity, we do only new music. We're working with young composers most of the time. I think a lot of people get scared with what they think modern music is. But when you get them here to listen to it and you get the composer there

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down and looks at the musicians, you don't have to do anything else to make it more serious. It's a sublime thing; it's obvious to everybody in the room.

**JM:** But you don't need a tuxedo.

**DT:** If you come in and play a vigil for a string quartet, you just play it like you should always play it. The audience is going to know that's genuine. If you come in and frame it as accessible—that's another loaded word too...

**EW:** People think Beethoven or Mozart is hard to understand. It's not hard to understand at all. It uses all the same tools that you hear on pop stations; it's in every movie you've ever watched. Everybody knows this language today. If you just sit down and listen, you'll get it no matter who you are.

**What is classical music's place in the 21st century?**

**JM:** We may have done contemporary music a little bit of a disservice

to chat with them about it, it's not a scary thing. You realize you can relate to this.

**JM:** And I think composers writing today have a broad musical history and aesthetic that composers writing a few hundred years ago did not have. When we talk about the spectrum, it's a tree. It's not just a trunk; it's all these millions of branches. A lot of the composers that are writing for us, you look at their iPods, it's not all classical music. We're commissioning John Harbison in the spring. He met Stravinsky; he was a jazz player. He's not just drawing on the classical cannon—he's drawing on being alive in the 21st century.

**EW:** There's an argument to be made that where the money comes from has really affected the content itself. At some point in the 19th century, there became a little bit more of a populist element—you had to write something that was going to be successful. And today, you go to



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RADIUS ENSEMBLE



ORIGINAL GRAVITY



PHOENIX



GROUPMUSE

RADIUS ENSEMBLE: KATE LEMMON; ORIGINAL GRAVITY: SCOTT KODY

school surrounded by a bunch of other people, you're going to write music for the people around you. It's a natural impulse, and that has led somewhat to the separation between contemporary music and classical music. But there's totally hope for it because if you go to these concerts, people are really into the old stuff. And when they say they're going to play a new piece now that just got written, everyone gets excited by that idea. Even if you hate the piece, that's still exciting, but it's only exciting in context of the older stuff too.

**Is classical music intimidating?**

**EW:** Everything's intimidating if you're not used to it. If I was to go to a soccer game in Ireland, that would be really intimidating because each team has its own song or stomps and I don't understand any of that stuff. Any time you have a situation like that, it's intimidating. But that doesn't mean that soccer is intimidating.

**JM:** But I think we need to give audiences a little credit, especially millennials. It's amazing seeing people be open to new experiences. But they also smell the bullshit a mile away. If you can give it to them in a way that feels authentic, they're going to be open to receiving it. It's our responsibility to curate it, and they let us lead them through. Kids are graduating from conservatories now, and instead of expecting to take auditions for major orchestras and have a job for life, they're now more entrepreneurial. When I graduated 20 years ago, I was that weirdo who didn't want to take auditions. I wanted to create something. Now I see a lot more kids who know that they're going to have to write their own ticket.

**DT:** In all of these endeavors, everyone's trying to keep the artistic level really high. That's number one, and a close second—or maybe tied—is trying to get that to open up to more people.

**You all prove that you can have high-quality music and present it in a different way. Jennifer, Radius Ensemble is in its 17th season. What changes over the years stick out?**

**JM:** When I started the group, when people asked what's special about Radius, they'd say, "Get this: They have a website." This is 1999. But, you know, not wearing black, speaking during concerts, a lot of these things are becoming more and more commonplace, and I'm finding that very refreshing.

**Dave, Phoenix is in its second season. What did you see missing that you felt like the group could add?**

**DT:** I was roommates with Matt, the music director. This idea started when he had assistant conductor auditions, and he kept thinking, "I would love to have one of these jobs, but even if I had one, I don't know if I'd like it." So as a classical percussionist, as a conductor, you just think, what can I do to make more opportunities for musicians like me that are related to our lives? That was inspired by going to a lot of more traditional concerts. As music students, we're bred to understand whatever the stuffy atmosphere is and still enjoy it. But going away from those concerts, there's not really enough there.

**Ezra, you're trying to get people involved so that hosting a Groupmuse in your living room is not just a novelty thing you might do once or twice but a way of getting to know the musicians in your community. What's the benefit of building those relationships?**

**EW:** I think of it like farmers markets. Wouldn't it be great if on every block there was a little farmstand and you got vegetables? On every block there is a musician who can play your music. Wouldn't it be nice to have the people on that block come together once or twice a month and just chill out and listen to this guy play? It's just a way of bringing your community together, which is something I certainly feel a lack of. A lot of neighborhoods that I travel around in and live in, people don't really know each other anymore. But I think that it's something people miss, and they want to connect with people that they live around.

**There are a lot of ensembles in this city that want a wider audience, but you're all sitting here because you're really dedicated to making it happen, and I think that will trickle down.**

**KK:** Quite honestly, part of the impetus behind starting Original Gravity was even though these new music concerts around town were fairly well-attended, I was still seeing more or less the same people. There's nothing wrong with having a hardcore following, but there's so many other people who would actually get into this that aren't coming. And there's the hope that maybe people do attend a traditional concert.

**DT:** One of the beginning concepts for us was that we can be like a gateway drug to all of the people who come to these kind of concerts. Maybe one day they're ready for that really traditional BSO experience. In terms of introduction, it's more of an ecosystem. We can all rise together. There's this whole untapped community out there. ♦



**IT TAKES A VILLAGE**

Original Gravity isn't the only concert series at Aeronaut. From Thursday's Funk & Flights to third Friday's Bites, Beats and Beamers, live performances flow almost as often as the beer.

Then there's Duck Village Stage, spearheaded by the Somerville brewery's first customer, Randy Winchester, who has also spent time behind the bar and in the lab as an intern while working toward a biotechnology graduate certificate at Boston University. Now, he finds himself booking acts for Duck Village, much in the same way he's pulled together 300 shows in the past eight years for the Nave Gallery's music series.

"I have a curatorial philosophy that's a win-win for everyone," Winchester says. His goal in both endeavors: Open doors for musicians looking for a place to play without shelling out their own money. Donations cover enough to keep the venue's lights on, and then the rest goes to the performers.

As for the Wednesday night series' namesake, he explains that it's a nod to a little-known nearby historic area. "During Prohibition, because of all the twisted little reeds back there, people could duck the authorities, so bootleggers and speak-easies popped up."

Since June, Duck Village has put on concerts with ensembles like Quartet Kalos and the Fourth Wall as well as Voice contestant Amanda Lee Peers; two versions of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and a reading of a musical have also graced the stage. Soon, saxophonist Dennis Shafer will perform his multimedia spectacular *RendrGram*, complete with a 12-by-18-foot pyramid projection screen. Fitted with microphones, the tap room is even wired for recording and live streaming.

"It's all part of [Aeronaut cofounder Ben Holmes'] plan of making this a community," Winchester says. "This isn't just a tap room; it's a public house. That's the way this place is being run."