

## CRITICS

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And there are plenty of rewards for venturing outside the box. Take Sunday's "Tabarro," which repeats this weekend. Sure, it looks homemade, and sure, it's hard to judge voices in a space so tiny that any volume makes your ears ring. But it sure sounded like some serious singing.

Shannon De Vine, jumping in on a few hours' notice as Michele, was an impressive baritone, and Noah Stewart, as Luigi, showed a ringing tenor to match his striking good looks. I'd be happy to hear either again on a larger stage. Though if classical music's future truly lies in alternative new audiences — as I believe, in part, it must — perhaps I should wish for them a big future on these smaller stages as well.



Members of QNG, a recorder quartet, at Galapagos on Sunday.

### CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

## For Downtown Clubs, The Uptown Classical

By ANNE MIDGETTE

Classical music is defined, in part, by where it's played. If it's at Avery Fisher Hall, it's probably classical; if it's at CBGB, it's probably not. So-called classical musicians have been happily challenging this traditional divide for years: hence the evolution of the downtown music scene, the erstwhile stomping ground of major artists like Steve Reich or Meredith Monk, who have yet to be fully acknowledged by classical music's old guard.

Now a younger generation continues to assail the bastion. Matt Haimovitz, the cellist, has played at CBGB. Renée Fleming has sung jazz at Joe's Pub. And sites like the downtown club Tonic and Galapagos Art Space in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, offer a catholic range of music, including the funky string quartet Ethel (at Tonic) or a new-music series called Darmstadt (at Galapagos).

Which is how I found myself Sunday night in Galapagos, preparing to hear a recorder quartet whose last New York City appearance was at a traditional uptown location: Weill Recital Hall.

"It's not true that young people don't like classical music," said Richard S. Weinert, president of Concert Artists Guild, which is presenting this German-based quartet, QNG. "Young people don't like recital halls."

He has a point, and it's not just young people. Even 40-somethings today may be more comfortable attending the decidedly down-market Amato Opera than the glittering Metropolitan Opera at 10 times the price. The studied formality of the concert hall is increasingly unfamiliar to today's audience, not to mention ticket prices that can put off even die-hard music lovers. The music itself is probably not as much of a barrier as you might think.

In fact, the paradoxical corollary is that when it comes to classical music, even an alternative audience seems to prefer classical standards to more exotic fare. Earlier the same day, the Vertical Player Repertory, a tiny opera company in a former sculpture studio on Court Street in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, had offered Puccini's "Tabarro." You might think that such a small company (the space seats perhaps 50) would be a natural for the new and experimental. But Judith Barnes, who founded the group in 1998, said her audience still preferred standards to the unfamiliar: she can sell out Puccini, but not a living composer.

In a continuing effort to bring its artists to new audiences, Concert Artists Guild may be learning the same thing. Its first foray into Galapagos through the aus-

pices of Kitchen Sink Music, an organization founded by one of Mr. Weinert's employees, brought the Parker String Quartet there in November, two days before the group's debut at Weill. The Parker opened with the first movement of Bartok's Fifth Quartet, followed by Beethoven and Kurtag. The audience response, said Mr. Weinert (an admittedly biased observer), was ecstatic. By contrast, on Sunday QNG offered an entire program of music written since 2001 by composers few in the audience had heard of, and the applause was polite but uninvolved.

There's no need to patronize the audience at Galapagos. Its politeness was a considerable step up from what you might encounter at Weill, if only in that no one seemed to need to cough in between pieces. But in a club setting, people aren't under the same social constraints as in a recital hall. They don't have to stay if the music doesn't grab them. The proverbial young audience is pretty much like any other audience, though possibly more discriminating: it will respond to vitality and flair. On Sunday QNG seemed somewhat at sea, offering one long, intense and not-that-compelling piece after another, and it was hard to imagine that the group would have attracted much more enthusiasm in a traditional classical-music space.

Still, more classical presenters and groups should be exploring this kind of space. For one thing, putting classical music into the context of other kinds of music demonstrates how well it stands up to the comparison. For another, classical music itself benefits from the intimacy and immediacy of a smaller arena. The point is to get people excited about it (and if they're not excited, to figure out why), and that point can be lost in a more formal setting, where the protocol is so well established that everything, it sometimes seems, is greeted with the same polite applause.

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