

Surround



Sound

Orchestras are experimenting with concerts that put audience members in close connection with the music—and the musicians. Concert newcomers find new approaches to classical music, and devotees gain fresh perspectives.

by Vivien Schweitzer

BEFORE A DECEMBER PERFORMANCE of *The Nutcracker* by the Experimental Orchestra in the ballroom of the Bohemian National Hall in Manhattan, conductor James Blachly urged attendees to experience the music however they preferred. Some members of the audience sat on chairs interspersed throughout the musicians, while others danced in front of the orchestra. A handful of listeners even sprawled out on the floor to listen.

At the conservative end of the classical music spectrum the tired debate continues about whether it's okay for listeners to clap

between movements. At the other end of the spectrum conductors such as Blachly are encouraging listeners to not only clap between movements, but to move around freely and even lie down if they feel so inclined.

Blachly is also music director of the Johnstown Symphony Orchestra in Pennsylvania, which performs at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown as well as in unorthodox venues such as a former steel mill. He is one of several orchestral entrepreneurs offering unusual seating arrangements to attract new listeners, retain

Opposite: At the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra's PSO360 series, launched in 2017, audience members sit onstage at Heinz Hall, surrounding a chamber ensemble of PSO musicians and guest artists. In photo: The final PSO360 concert of the orchestra's 2017-18 season, on May 19, featured violinist Augustin Hadelich as soloist.

regular concertgoers, and offer everyone an experience they'll return for. Nick Gray, 36, a newcomer to classical music who attended the *Nutcracker* performance on December 2, said "being able to move around" was his favorite element of the experience, noting that he didn't have to worry about "clapping in the wrong place."

In the wider arts world, audiences have proven willing to pay steep ticket prices for immersive events such as *Sleep No More*, the interactive, site-specific theater hit inspired by *Macbeth* and film noir, which has been running since 2011 in New York. Classical music impresarios have also been experimenting during the last decade or so with ways to integrate listeners into the performance space. In 2007, during a concert of Monteverdi madrigals by the British vocal ensemble I Fagiolini, the musicians wandered amid patrons seated at the Stanley H. Kaplan Penthouse in Lincoln Center. Describing the event, Allan Kozinn wrote in his *New York Times* review that "the main dividend of this staging is that the listeners are surrounded by the individual strands of Monteverdi's



A young concertgoer gets into the spirit at the Experiential Orchestra's December 2018 performance of *The Nutcracker* in the ballroom of the Bohemian National Hall in Manhattan, led by Music Director James Blachly. Audience members were welcome to sit on chairs interspersed throughout the musicians, sprawl on the floor to listen, and dance to the music.

Some conductors are encouraging listeners to move around freely and dance if they feel so inclined.

polyphony. And with a performance this good, that's a spectacular place to be."

For David Bernard, the founder and music director of the Park Avenue Chamber Symphony, an avocational orchestra in New York City, the most inspiring place to be is indeed inside the music. Bernard created the *InsideOut* concert series to nurture new classical music enthusiasts and encourage regular concertgoers to experience music from a different perspective. Bernard leads *InsideOut* concerts with the Park Avenue orchestra and with Long Island's Massapequa Philharmonic, where he is music director, but *InsideOut* is also its own entity. "Most of what is so exciting and thrilling happens on the stage," he says. "Folks who sit in the audience receive about 5 percent of what's going on. How can we expect them to be enthusiastic about coming to live concerts if we're not giving them the full experience?" Bernard conducts Park Avenue Chamber Symphony's *InsideOut* concerts in the flexible DiMenna Center for Classical Music: audience members rotate between different



At a recent *InsideOut* concert by the Park Avenue Chamber Symphony, Music Director David Bernard led works by Holst and Ligeti, with audience members seated among the musicians at New York City's DiMenna Center for Classical Music.

Park Avenue Chamber Symphony violinist Graham Rash on the orchestra's *InsideOut* concerts: "You can't necessarily appreciate the value of playing an instrument until you've been up close and felt the power of a tuba or the sweetness of a violin or the wonderful sound of a cello."

sections of the orchestra for each movement. He doesn't provide programs for the *InsideOut* concerts, which he touts as the way forward for orchestras, because "classical music can be enjoyed viscerally and you don't need to read about it in order to enjoy the music."

Before a well-attended *InsideOut* concert in February at the DiMenna Center, Bernard spoke to the audience about what he hoped they would experience while listening to Holst's *The Planets* and Ligeti's *Atmosphères*. "When you're part of a concert audience you are having music delivered to you, and you see what's happening at a distance," he said. "Here, you don't only get to hear: you get to see and feel



Windsor Symphony Orchestra

At the Windsor Symphony Orchestra's *Onstage at the Capitol* series in Ontario, Canada, listeners sit and dine or drink at cabaret tables on the stage of the Capitol Theatre near the orchestra. In photo: Music Director Robert Franz leads a Windsor Symphony *Onstage* performance on October 18, 2018.

the music happening all around you. This is what I hope you walk away with from this concert."

After the orchestra performed an excerpt from *Jupiter*, Bernard asked for feedback from listeners: one woman said she could "feel the vibrations in my body and in the soles of my feet." The event included video footage and images of the

solar system and live commentary from Dr. Jacqueline Faherty, senior scientist and astrophysicist at the American Museum of Natural History and the Hayden Planetarium.

Up Close and Personal

In Canada, during the Windsor Symphony Orchestra's *Live the Orchestra Experience*, part of its *ONSTAGE at the Capitol* series, listeners sit and dine or drink at cabaret tables positioned on the stage of the Capitol Theatre near the orchestra. The three-concert series was launched during the 2018-19 season, but the orchestra had tested the waters in 2017-18 with a one-off called "Beethoven's Biergarten" that sold out. In a promotional video, Music Director Robert Franz explains that "rather than sitting out in the audience and receiving the music as we normally perform, it's really fun to get on stage with us." He adds that of course the traditional listening experience is also worthwhile, but points out that "it's one sound to hear an orchestra out in the hall. It's a completely different sound to hear the music being made right next to you within three or four feet of where you're sitting."

Hungarian conductor Iván Fischer also encourages listeners to enjoy the "surround sound" experience. During midnight concerts with his Budapest Festival Orchestra, he invites audience members to sit on beanbag chairs amidst the musicians, or on



Chris Lee

The view from the conductor's podium at the New York Philharmonic's 2012 *Philharmonic 360* concerts at the Park Avenue Armory.

bleachers next to the orchestra. In 2014, *New Yorker* critic Alex Ross described the experience of being “embedded with the cellos” for a performance of Prokofiev’s Third Piano Concerto, with Alexander Toradze as soloist, writing, “Acoustically, the Prokofiev left much to be desired: those of us on the beanbags had a hard time hearing the piano, while those seated at the front of the bleachers may have heard little else. Yet it was revelatory to listen from such a peculiar vantage: you could grasp how the cello parts fit into the whole, as simple figures contributed to a machine-like mass.”

During Blachly’s *Nutcracker* performance in December, audience member Ada Brunstein, 48, sat near the brass section. For Brunstein, who is not a devotee of classical music, sitting far from the orchestra can render the experience an emotionally disconnected one. After sitting in the orchestra, however, she said: “I like seeing the notes on the page that they’re playing from. I like feeling the music in my bones because I’m so close to the instruments. For me the proximity adds layers of engagement with the music.” During a post-concert reception after the *InsideOut* event, Meryl Dakin, 30, who grew up listening to classical music, said, “It was incredible to be in the audience



Larry Ford

InsideOut Family Concerts at the Park Avenue Chamber Symphony make the music up close and personal for children—and adults.

with the musicians around us. You can feel the vibrations of the instruments. I think there is more to engage you with this kind of concert.” Dakin bought tickets to the event for as a Christmas present for her husband, Nathan Johnson, 30, who had never been to a classical concert before. He described the experience as “amazing” and said he now feels inspired to listen to more classical music.

And what about the musicians? Are the violinists worried about inadvertently elbowing a listener in the face during a virtuosic passage? Is it distracting to have listeners peering over their shoulders and sometimes filming them on cell phones at close proximity? Bernard admits that the *InsideOut* concept can initially prove uncomfortable for the musicians, and there is more pressure on them. Blachly usually offers the surround-sound experience during encores, noting that the musicians might find it distracting during a full performance.

Jordan Lee, a violinist who performed in the *InsideOut* concert, said it can be challenging to remain focused when pieces are performed with breaks between movements, as they are at the *InsideOut* events. “I had to retrain my brain,” she says, in order to “get out of concert mode and then

The Pittsburgh Symphony launched the PSO360 chamber music series in 2017 to facilitate a greater sense of intimacy for listeners, with two hundred audience members seated on the stage of Heinz Hall surrounding the musicians.

back in.” Lee, who enjoys seeing audience reactions up close, adds that as a music student she was often reminded to make classical music more accessible. “I feel like this is a great way to bring people in,” she says. “Otherwise, musicians are tiny dots on stage.”

Violinist Graham Rash describes the *InsideOut* concerts as “a fantastic outreach and educational tool. You can’t necessarily appreciate the value of playing an instrument until you’ve been up close and felt the power of a tuba or the sweetness of a violin or the wonderful sound of a cello.” He adds that he didn’t find it distracting to perform with audience members in close proximity.



Alison Stock

James Blachly, music director of the Experiential Orchestra (NYC) and Johnstown Symphony Orchestra (PA).



Thessen Imagery

Cellist Joshua Roman was the soloist at the California Symphony's 2018 *Symphony Surround* gala benefit, held at the Claremont Hotel in Berkeley.

VIP Treatment

Offering patrons the chance to sit amid the musicians is being incorporated by some organizations as a perk for gala events. During the California Symphony's *Symphony Surround* fundraisers, patrons dine in close proximity to the musicians, with the performance tailored to allow wait staff to serve food. Executive Director Aubrey Bergauer said the idea came

about after donors gave "great feedback" about open rehearsals in which they sat on stage. Together with Music Director Donato Cabrera she devised an immersive experience that featured the violinist Anne Akiko Meyers as soloist in the inaugural 2017 event and the cellist Joshua Roman at the 2018 event at the Claremont Hotel in Berkeley.

Bergauer says the concerts have helped

the California Symphony expand its audience and donor base. Tickets to the fundraiser are \$500, but even at that high price, Bergauer says, it attracts new listeners. "Price is always about a value proposition," she says. "We have new and younger people in their thirties and forties, and they bring their friends." Tickets costing \$500, of course, are only going to attract a well-heeled new audience. Bergauer notes the dilemma in offering the experience as a gateway one: "It's such a high price point: if we offer it in a non-gala way, will people come back and pay for the gala?" Blachly calls the chance to sit inside the orchestra the "VIP experience."

The Concert Experience

The concept of offering audience members a complete "experience," VIP or otherwise, has flourished in recent years in the classical world. Conceptual artist Marina Abramovic's staging of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* in NYC's cavernous Park Avenue Armory in 2015 was billed as a "reimagining of the traditional concert experience." The audience sat in deck chairs positioned around a long motorized platform that slowly transported the pianist Igor Levit from one part of the hall to another as he played the complete work.

For the *Philharmonic 360* concerts at the Armory in 2012, the New York Philharmonic performed works by Stockhausen, Boulez, Ives, and Mozart with musicians surrounding the audience. During the countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo's recent multimedia extravaganza *Glass Handel* performances, staged in Philadelphia and New York, listeners were wheeled individually while seated in their chairs to different areas of the space to experience music, dance, video, and live painting. Guests at Andrew Ousley's imaginative *Angel's Share* series can partake in a whiskey tasting before being ferried by trolley through the Green-Wood Cemetery in



Chris Lyle

For its *Philharmonic 360* concerts at the Park Avenue Armory in 2012, the New York Philharmonic performed with musicians in eight different groups surrounding a central section of the audience, while other audience members were seated adjacent to the musicians. At center, then-Music Director Alan Gilbert conducts Pierre Boulez's *Rituel in memoriam Bruno Maderna* for Orchestra in Eight Groups.

Brooklyn to the catacombs where the musicmaking takes place.

Most orchestras who perform regularly on a particular stage can't suddenly accommodate a dozen listeners in their ranks or cart listeners around between movements or to different locations. But concert promoters have devised other ways to create a more intimate environment by bringing audience members in closer proximity to the performance. In 2005, seating arrangements were altered for the Mostly Mozart Festival, which has taken place every summer for decades at Lincoln Center. Jane Moss, the festival's artistic director, told the *New York Times* that year: "We wanted to make Avery Fisher Hall feel smaller and more intimate to support the greater intimacy of the music." For the festival's

as a chamber orchestra. The 360 format enables the orchestra to perform repertoire, such as Baroque music, not suited to a large concert hall.

Pittsburgh Symphony President and CEO Melia P. Tourangeau spoke of the pressure on arts administrators to provide an "experience" for the audience, explaining that the 360 concerts are a way to "maximize the talent in town, give listeners a different kind of experience, and showcase the orchestra in a different way."

The first concert sold out immediately, she said, and ensuing concerts have also proved a hot ticket. Reviewing the violinist Augustin Hadelich's performance in the final PSO360 concert of the 2017-18 season for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, critic Jeremy Reynolds wrote that "hearing Heinz [Hall] from a musician's perspective was delightful." Five PSO360 concerts are planned for the 2019-20 season.

Proximity to musicians is such a growing expectation that the Milwaukee Symphony plans to include 150 seats on-

stage, behind, and above the orchestra, in its new Milwaukee Symphony Center, which will feature a total capacity of 1,750. The center is slated to open in 2020 after

Proximity to musicians is such a growing expectation that the Milwaukee Symphony plans to include 150 seats onstage, behind, and above the orchestra in its new Milwaukee Symphony Center.

the orchestra converts the Warner Grand Theater, an historic movie palace in downtown Milwaukee, into a modern concert hall. The renovated venue will include public spaces for audiences to socialize, as well as such amenities as valet parking. The building's antique wooden phone booths will be transformed into listening stations



Musician meets audience at one of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra's in-the-round Symphony Soiree events.



Ed DeArmitt/Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra

At the Pittsburgh Symphony's PSO360 concert on Valentine's Day 2019, pianist Emanuel Ax was joined by Guest Concertmaster Alexi Kenney, First Violin Christopher Wu, Acting Principal Viola Tatjana Mead Chamis, and Principal Cello Anne Martindale Williams.

events in David Geffen Hall (as Avery Fisher Hall is now called), a temporary stage extends some 30 feet into the audience. Extra seating is placed beside and behind the musicians.

Since Heinz Hall, home of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, doesn't have a smaller hall for chamber music, administrators were similarly creative with how to use the space onstage. Mary Persin, vice president of artistic planning, launched the PSO360 series in October 2017 to facilitate a greater sense of intimacy for listeners. Two hundred audience members are seated on the stage of Heinz Hall and surround the PSO musicians, who perform



Audience members became ecstatic dancers at the Experimentals Orchestra's performance of *The Rite of Spring*, led by Music Director James Blachly at Brooklyn's National Sawdust.

Allison Stock, courtesy of Experimentals Orchestra



Rendering: Kehrer Seltzer

The Milwaukee Symphony's plans for the Milwaukee Symphony Center, slated to open in 2020 in a renovated movie palace, includes 150 onstage seats that can be used by choral ensembles or audience members.

featuring the orchestra's recordings. Patrons will be able to purchase drinks from several mobile bars and take them into the hall. Speaking about the inclusion of onstage seating, Susan Loris, executive vice president for institutional advancement, told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, "I'd want that seat for Edo (de Waart)," the

MSO's music director laureate, "because he is quite animated in his face versus what you see from behind."

Concertgoers certainly seem to appreciate the chance to experience orchestral music in different formats and from different vantagepoints. The beginning of Blachly's *Nutcracker* event felt rather like

a high school dance, with audience members sitting on chairs lining the walls of the room as orchestra staff tried to get the ball rolling with their own exuberant dancing. But it didn't take long for audience members to join in, with teenage and middle-aged couples dancing alongside each other.

"There's a certain jadedness if you go to a lot of concerts. You may not have the wide-eyed wonder of a young person going for the first time. We try and keep it fresh for everybody," says Blachly, explaining why he experiments with different ways to present music. "I can always find new things in a Beethoven symphony. We are not trying to displace the standard concert experience, but invite people in so that when they next attend a traditional concert they hear things differently." **S**

VIVIEN SCHWEITZER is a music journalist, pianist, and author. Her first book, *A Mad Love: An Introduction to Opera*, was published in September by Basic Books.

"InsideOut Concerts

are transforming the traditional concert experience...the seats are with the players themselves, in the thick of the violins or right next to a harp. There's no separation here, just a mass of pumping hearts in a singular musical communion." **WQXR**

"I felt every note. I could hear everything and could see the faces of the musicians. It was fantastic!"

Andrea Arroyo audience member

"Holy cow... Ligeti's 'Atmosphères' sounds EVEN MORE AMAZING when you're in among the players." **Steve Smith**

music critic, commenting as an audience member



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