

HOMETOWN U.S.A.: ALBUQUERQUE

Paying homage to music at the Church of Beethoven

You could call the secular Sunday ritual a weekly concert series. But it's more than that. It is a church without preaching, and without prayer.

At its Sunday morning services there is something spiritual, all right, but it doesn't have to do with Allah, or Buddha, or God. Instead, it comes from music, from passionate renditions of works composed by Brahms and Bach and, of course, Beethoven -- for whom the church is named.

Each week the Church of Beethoven's musical performances draw a committed group of art-loving locals. The service, which also features poetry, visual art and other types of music, is at home in Albuquerque, a city known for its eccentricities (its nickname: Albuquerque) as well as for being a crossroads of culture.

Most regulars at the Church of Beethoven are not religious, said founder Felix Wurman, but are simply "people looking to be uplifted on a Sunday morning." It's not really a church, of course, but it's not quite a standard concert series either. Its intent, Wurman said, is part entertainment, part spiritual awakening.

Wurman, 51, was a cellist with the New Mexico Symphony Orchestra when, two years ago, he played a church gig that inspired him. It wasn't the theology he liked -- Wurman isn't religious. It was the ecstasy of the music, and the warmth of the parishioners enjoying it together. He had an idea: "How about a church that has music as its principal element, rather than as an afterthought?"

He recruited other musicians from the symphony, and together, in an abandoned gas station off old Route 66, they began playing concerts each Sunday. More and more people started coming ("I just leave here feeling really soul-satisfied," explained one regular, Veronica Reed, 68, who said it was a treat to see symphony members perform up close), and after a couple of years, the concert series outgrew the space. Its current home, a renovated warehouse in downtown Albuquerque, is rather cathedral-like, with warm red walls, vaulted wood ceilings and stained glass windows.

Wurman no longer runs the show. He was diagnosed with cancer last year, and he now lives in North Carolina, where he is undergoing treatment. Recently, the Church of Beethoven hosted a fundraiser to help pay his medical bills.

"His sickness caused a lot of us to crawl out of the woodwork and help," said Don Michaelis, a volunteer. Michaelis, 65, said the church's momentum had not slowed in Wurman's absence. "Felix's illness has made the people who remain more committed to seeing this succeed," he said.

Michaelis and his wife, Pamela, rarely miss a Sunday. Not long ago they stood chatting with friends in the warehouse, waiting for the performance-service to begin. A masseuse gave free massages in the corner while baristas served lattes at an espresso bar. When the emcee, David Felberg, took the stage, the crowd of 100 or so took their seats. First on the menu this morning, Felberg said, was Polka Dot Dot Dot, a band from Olympia,

Wash. With artsy haircuts, tattoos and piercings, the band looked more suited for a punk rock show than a church service. But their set of quiet songs with pretty harmonies had everyone in the audience nodding along. When they finished, the crowd clapped and hooted. "I felt that people's hearts were really wide open," said a band member who goes by the name Onyx of Olympia. "It's the kind of church that I can really get down with."

Next up was a local poet, Demetria Martinez. The audience hung on her spare verse, which alluded to New Mexico's landscape and to its history of Spanish colonization. The reading was a spiritual experience for Martinez, she said later. "Poetry is how I pray," said Martinez, 49. "And reading it is ceremony and ritual. It's communion."

For the final act, Felberg, 40, picked up his viola and called up the other classical musicians. They launched into Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 in B flat major, three lively, emotional movements composed by Johann Sebastian Bach. The musicians, sitting just a few feet from the front row of spectators, worked furiously at their instruments, and many in the audience swayed their heads and tapped their fingers in time. When the last note sounded, everyone stood and cheered.

Don and Pamela Michaelis wore smiles. Pamela, 65, said she had felt the music "in the cavities" of her chest. She said she thinks the point of religion is to feel a part of something. The Church of Beethoven, she said, provides that. "That's what music is," she said. "It's something bigger than us."

Earlier, before the propulsive melodies of the Brandenburg concerto, the service devoted to sound had taken a break for just the opposite: Felberg stood before the crowd and asked for quiet. Some in the audience clasped their hands. Most closed their eyes. Don Michaelis later said he thought of Felix Wurman.

And for a few hushed minutes, it felt like church.

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