

## A Sense of Community in Gotham

New York City can seem like a dog-eat-dog world for early music performers but one administrator is trying to change all that

By Heidi Waleson



AT THE CONCLUSION of New York's first Early Music Celebration in 2004, Gene Murrow, who ran the event for the Early Music Foundation, was struck by the number of participants who told him how important it was for their own sense of community. "These people are struggling to make a living, and they said that the Celebration gave them the feeling that somebody out there cared about their musical niche," Murrow says.

Three years later, Murrow, who left the Early Music Foundation in 2006, has come up with a plan to bolster that sense of community on a practical and ongoing basis. He has launched Gotham Early Music Scene, an organization intended to aid and promote the many early music players and groups based in New York City. The organization, currently budgeted at about \$200,000, will serve several functions. GEMS will be a presenter, beginning with a series of three concerts, each featuring four local groups, in the 375-seat concert hall in the brand-new New York Times Building, in October. It will be the umbrella organization for Sinfonia New York, a new period instrument orchestra directed by John Scott, the director of music at St. Thomas Church Fifth Avenue. It will also provide service functions, such as box office and ticketing, for New York ensembles.

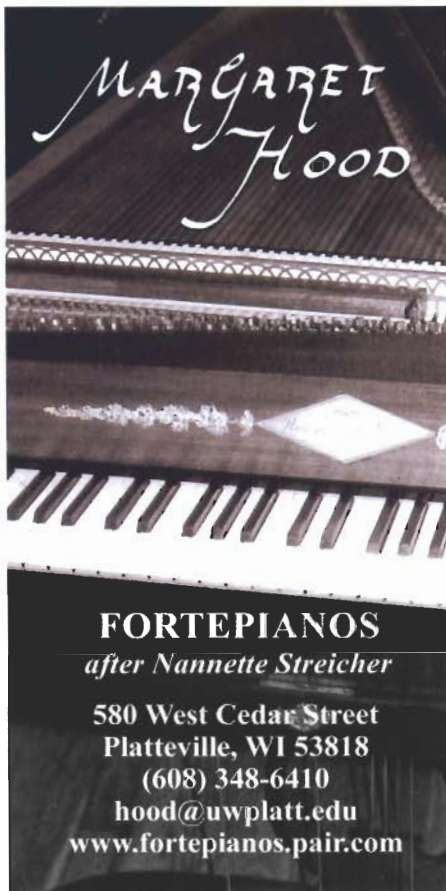
In order to be sure that he was not "putting forth a brilliant answer to a question that nobody asked," Murrow spent several months talking to musicians, presenters, and funders. He was inspired by the example of Dance Theater Workshop, founded in the 1970s to provide work and space for dance "when

the indie dance company movement was where the early music movement is now – a patchwork of groups." Another impetus was the fact that the New York Collegium, one of the city's larger period instrument orchestras, was going "on hiatus" in 2007, eliminating a lot of work for musicians. Also, Murrow, who has a business background, says, "The scene struck me as horribly inefficient. All these gamba, recorder, and violone players are spending time on nitty-gritty things like photocopying, postcard mailings, selling tickets, and filling out NYSCA forms. As a business model, it doesn't make sense. These people want to make art, not examine mailing lists. There is a need for back-office processing for all these groups."

The showcase concerts, scheduled for October 4 and 7, take advantage of the opening of a new hall to attract audiences, as well as the association with *The New York Times*, which means free advertising that would otherwise be very expensive. Murrow had originally planned only one concert, with each group playing a 30-minute set, but was overwhelmed with responses to his invitation, sent to every group that had advertised a concert on polyphony.com, the New York early music website, in 2006-07. (The performers include such ensembles as Trefoil, a Medieval trio, the Spiritus Collective, brass and strings, and My Lord Chamberlain's Consort, a Renaissance ensemble.) GEMS also sent e-mails to the more than 1,500 presenters around the world who present early music, inviting them to New York for

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## A Sense of Community

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the weekend to attend the concerts. To sweeten the invitation, he emulated the tycoon Warren Buffet and arranged for a dedicated employee at American Express to handle travel arrangements for the visitors, as well as a package of perks from New York's tourism bureau. As of June, a dozen presenters had signed up.

The purpose of Sinfonia New York, which is being put together by cellist Christine Gummere and flutist Sandra Miller, is to create an orchestra with a distinctive sound and collegiality – a group of people who love to play together. It will be contracted “collectively,” Murrow says, and made available as an “orchestra for hire,” like the Orchestra of St. Luke's. And while most period instrument orchestras are conductor-driven, the choice of John Scott was also collective: musicians were asked for the names of conductors for whom they would most like to work, and, Murrow says, Scott's name appeared on every list. The all-Haydn debut concert

of the 30-member ensemble will be at Town Hall on October 1; future projects will depend on the response. “We're trying to avoid doing too much too soon and disappointing people,” Murrow says. “If the musicians like John, if the audience likes it, and if donations come in, we'll start putting together a real season. If not – we'll let it go.”

While the showcase concerts and the orchestra can help raise the profile of early music in New York, the administrative services will be the backbone of GEMS. So far, the group provides a credit card portal, so that small groups will be able to take credit card payments in advance and at the door, as well as a telephone box office service for three weeks before the event. As of June, Parthenia, Asteria, the American Classical Orchestra, and Clarion Concerts had already signed up for the service. The

concerts will also be listed on the GEMS website, where tickets can also be purchased. For the future, Murrow hopes to offer “superscriptions”: for example, a customer could purchase “a season of Baroque orchestras” with different groups or a series of Medieval music ensembles, each offering a subscription discount. “All the direct costs are passed along to the groups, but they are smaller than they would be if it was done individually,” Murrow says. “Indirect costs, such as salary and office, will be supplied by charitable donations. We hope philanthropists see it the same way.”

So far, GEMS is running very lean. Of its four employees, only Naomi Morse, with the title of “assistant,” is paid. Two retired executives – Herb Katz (communications) and Paul Ross (operations) – are volunteering their services, and Murrow, the executive director, is paid \$1 a year. Murrow expects that the annual budget will eventually be higher than the current \$200,000, with funds coming in through

donations, merchandising, and ticket sales. And he has more ideas of services to offer: possibly becoming a home for the New York Collegium's award-winning outreach program, run by Nina Stern, and taking over other administrative functions for early music groups.

For the fundraising muscle needed to pay for its presentations and services, Murrow sees strength in numbers. “It's very hard for a small group to raise any kind of significant money. They are not on the radar screen of these funders. It's easier to raise big money to do something big. If we can say that we represent a significant slice of early music in New York, and we need \$200,000 to run it well, we have a better shot than 20 groups trying to get \$10,000 each. When I was selling computers, it was a lot easier to sell one \$100,000 system to one client than to sell 20 smaller ones.” ❧

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