

Association to Promote Early Music (Better Late Than Never)

By ALLAN KOZINN

For the last 20 years critics and early-music fans in New York have lamented that, despite a growing number of period-instrument ensembles and vocal groups, and the continuing popularity of early music on recordings, it remains a backwater in the city's musical life. Now a new organization, Gotham Early Music Scene, is setting out to change all that.

Its founder and executive director, Gene Murrow, says that by offering support services to New York's ensembles, and by presenting concerts meant as much to draw the attention of out-of-town presenters as New York concertgoers, Gotham hopes to bring cohesiveness and vitality to the city's patchwork of early-music groups. The organization will help

them with marketing, ticket sales, merchandising and assembling the financial data required for grant applications.

Gotham is also assembling a new period-instrument orchestra specializing in the Classical and early-Romantic repertory under the direction of John Scott, the organist and director of music at St. Thomas Church Fifth Avenue. The ensemble of 35 players will make its debut at Town Hall on Oct. 1 with an all-Haydn program.

Gotham is also offering a mini-festival in which 12 ensembles — among them, Pomerium Musices, Parthenia, Lionheart and the New York Consort of Viols — will play 30-minute sets in concerts on Oct. 4 and 7 at the Stage at Times Center, the 375-seat concert hall in The New

York Times's new building on Eighth Avenue at 41st Street.

The series takes place during Early Music Celebration 2007, the second festival run by Frederick Renz and the Early Music Foundation, which supports Mr. Renz's ensemble, Early Music New York. Mr. Murrow was general manager of Mr. Renz's foundation for four years, through 2006. Both men describe their parting as amicable, and say they are not in competition: Mr. Renz said he invited Mr. Murrow to make his series part of the larger celebration, and Mr. Murrow said that it would be.

“We thought it would be useful to have a cluster of concerts that shows off as many New York groups as possible,” Mr. Murrow said. “By putting several groups on one bill, our hope was that if someone is a great fan of Pomerium but had never heard Artek, this would be an opportunity to hear them at the same performance.”

He added, though, that presenting concerts would be only a small part of what Gotham does, adding that its focus would be on helping groups market themselves more efficiently. He argued that most early-music groups are grass-roots organizations in which the performers are responsible for everything from preparing mailings to writing grant applications, using time that would be better spent researching, rehearsing and performing. Turning the administrative tasks over to Gotham not only leaves them free to pursue their purely musical endeavors, he said, but also reduces the ensembles' costs.

“It's a matter of economy of scale,” he said. “It's much more expensive, and less efficient, for 20 groups to maintain their own mailing lists than for us to do it for all 20. The same with credit-card processing. To get merchant status from any of the credit-card companies is expensive for a single group that will use it in a handful of concerts every year. But if all the groups combine and use us as the credit-card gateway, they get the benefit.”

Mr. Murrow said that the cost savings are passed on to the ensembles. He added that he expected Gotham itself to be supported by donations; so far he has raised \$100,000 to get started, and he is convinced that he can run the new orchestra for about \$200,000 a year, he said.

“This is the big question,” he said. “If these are small groups, with limited money flowing through the system, how can they pay for what we do? And the answer is, they can't.

But I'm convinced that by representing this whole slice of culture in New York, we can attract five- or six-figure donations.”

The organization's board includes Louise Basbas, the executive director of the Music Before 1800 series; Joyce Bodig, the concert manager at the Frick Collection; Rita Putnam, a program officer at the New York State Council on the Arts; Anne W. Lowenthal, an art historian; and Anthony Elitcher, a lawyer.

“I'm a pie-in-the-sky optimist,” Mr. Murrow said. “But think about culture in New York as a timeline, from 1870 on. You see the founding of the Metropolitan Museum, the New York Philharmonic, the New York City Ballet, jazz at Lincoln Center; at each point, the city recognized a center of gravity in our culture that needed support. And I believe that it's time for the city to have an institution to support this part of the culture.”