In conclusion

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 Walen

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 assist 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 instrumentation 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 largest period instrument orchestras, was going "on hiatus" in 2007, eliminating a lot of work for musicians. Also, Murrow, who has business background, says, "The scene struck me as horribly inefficient. All these gamba, recorder, and violine players are spending tons of 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 Teqo!l, 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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The purpose of Sinfonia New York is to create an orchestra with a distinctive sound and collegiality - a group of people who love to play together.

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