

MUSIC + DANCE

Rush Hour reinvents itself for summer



JOHN VON RHEIN
Heard & Scene

The sudden death in January 2014 of Deborah Sobol, the Chicago pianist who founded and directed the free weekly classical Rush Hour Concerts series from its inception in 2000, could easily have marked the demise of the series, so inextricably was it wedded to her artistic vision.

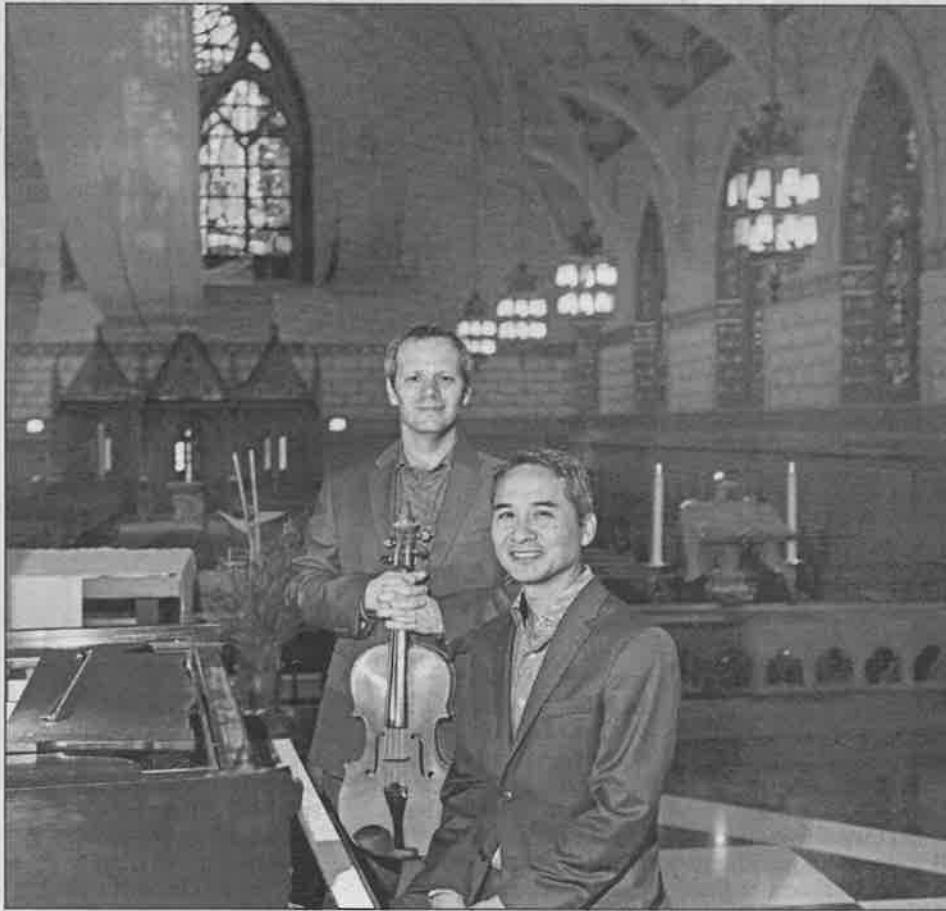
But as the summer showcase of Chicago music and musicians — “great music for busy lives,” as the series bills itself — begins its 16th season of mini-concerts at the end of the workday this week at St. James Cathedral in Chicago’s River North area, the attendance remains solid, the programs imaginative, the artists high-caliber.

New leadership has effectively reinvented Rush Hour Concerts, which presents live concerts beginning at 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Aug. 25 in the acoustically congenial church, 65 E. Huron St., at the corner of Wabash Avenue and Huron.

Retooling Rush Hour has been a delicate balancing act, says violist Anthony Devroye, who took over as the series’ artistic director in September after having served as interim director for the previous seven months.

On the one hand, he wanted the series to remain true to Sobol’s mission of providing a relaxed concert experience that would be, in his words, “as open and accessible as possible.” On the other hand, he wanted to tweak the format enough to enliven the programs and attract a wider, perhaps younger listenership.

“Keeping with the traditions Debbie started, I also wanted to bring in performers who hadn’t been with us previously and experiment with the presentation,” Devroye explains. The violist, an associate professor at the Northern Illinois University School of Music in DeKalb, has performed



JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Anthony Devroye, left, artistic director of the Rush Hour Concerts series, with associate artistic head Kuang-Hao Huang, aims to draw a wider listenership to St. James Cathedral.

several times on the Rush Hour series as a solo artist and with the Avalon String Quartet, whose violist he has been since 2004.

With fresh ideas from Devroye and the input of participating artists, this year’s concert schedule sets masterpieces of the chamber music repertory alongside newer music that will provide a forum for some of Chicago’s leading composers and contemporary ensembles.

A three-concert “Here and Now” series, for example, will include performances by Fifth House Ensemble (works of Stacy Garrop and Dan Visconti), the Spektral Quartet (music by David Remnick) and Third Coast Percussion (works of Glenn Kotche, Augusta Read Thomas and David Skidmore).

“I want our audience to engage with the music on whatever level they want to, whether they are seasoned concertgoers or trying classical music for the first time,” Devroye says.

Rush Hour always offered preconcert receptions

during which listeners could chat up the musicians before rather than after hearing them perform.

This season takes the idea a step further, to what the artistic director calls “curated conversations about the evening’s activities.” Reading material — essays, book chapters, blog posts, and such — will be made available to listeners in advance of the coming week’s concert, providing a starting point for audience participation.

“I never cared for the idea of a lecturer feeding the audience information,” says Devroye. “I’m much more interested in (developing) a community of listeners with their own perspectives, sharing their ideas about what we are doing. The audience will be free to create whatever experience they want it to be.”

Putting together the series is rather like assembling a jigsaw puzzle made up of myriad tiny pieces, as he puts it. But he considers himself fortunate to have able colleagues

assisting him. They include pianist Kuang-Hao Huang, Rush Hour’s associate artistic director; CSO cellist Brant Taylor, consulting artistic director; Kitty Rothschild, executive director; and Anna Solomon, concert producer, along with several staffers and interns.

Participating artists and ensembles accept an honorarium considerably smaller than their normal concert fees, because they value the series and the additional outlet it gives them, Devroye explains. Costs are covered by private donations, foundation and organizational support, and government grants.

Rush Hour concerts typically attract audiences of 200-300 listeners, although several performances last summer drew capacity crowds of just over 600, he reports.

Huang’s primary duty is overseeing Rush Hour’s annual “Make Music Chicago,” a citywide celebration inspired by the annual “Fete de la Musique” in Paris. The fifth Chicago edition on June 21 — Father’s Day and the

summer solstice — will include some 200 performances by some 1,000 amateur and professional musicians at more than 70 locations around town. As in the past, everyone taking part in the free, daylong event will volunteer his or her services.

Something of the same dedication to a cause keeps Rush Hour listeners coming back year after year, week after week. Devroye offers the following example of audience loyalty:

“An elderly gentleman has been a volunteer for us for many years despite a back problem that doesn’t allow him to move around very quickly. He has been at every concert handing out programs and greeting patrons at the door. Earlier this year, he notified us that because of his physical ailments, he wouldn’t be able to keep doing that any longer. He then sent us a small donation. We found that incredibly generous. It’s emblematic of the goodwill people have toward the series.”

Rush Hour Concerts continues Tuesday evenings through Aug. 25 at St. James Cathedral, 65 E. Huron St.; www.rushhour.org. WFMT-FM 98.7 broadcasts each week’s event live, beginning at 5:45 p.m. Tuesdays. For a schedule of “Make Music Chicago” events, go to www.makemusicchicago.org.

Rembrandt’s season finale

The Rembrandt Chamber Players has been one of the more notable success stories in Chicago chamber music. The gutsy yet polished performances that closed the ensemble’s 25th anniversary season Sunday at Nichols Concert Hall in Evanston underscored one reason it flourishes when other local groups appear to be floundering: Regular appearances by guest artists help keep Rembrandt’s repertory fresh and varied.

As a matter of fact, the guests outnumbered the regulars on Sunday’s roster. The former included harpsichordist Jory Vinikour; cellist Julian Hersh; Lyric Opera Orchestra concertmaster Robert Hanford and

his wife, Sheila Hanford, violins; and Chicago Symphony Orchestra members Brant Taylor, cello, and Laurence Neuman, viola.

Vinikour brought typical vivacity to his modest duties in “Rembrandt Music,” which Chicago keyboardist David Schrader composed in honor of the group’s 10th anniversary in 2000 and subsequently revised.

Neo-baroque in manner, the two-movement piece was intended to bring out the distinctive musical personalities of the core players, and it does so as a mannerly six-way conversation. Cascading keyboard trills sparked equally fine contributions from Sandra Morgan, flute, Robert Morgan, oboe, Robert Hanford, violin, Carol Cook, viola and Taylor, cello.

Nobody plays much of anything by Albert Roussel these days, let alone his chamber music. The French composer’s 1929 Trio for flute, viola and cello, Opus 40, is typical Rousselian neoclassicism, the three instrumental lines going their own jaunty way, with some piquant harmonics to enliven the string parts. The score’s merits were effectively argued by Sandra Morgan, Neuman and Hersh.

Sunday brought the second live performance of Tchaikovsky’s sextet “Souvenir de Florence” that I’ve attended within the last two weeks. While the Emerson String Quartet and guests did a fine job with it in their performance last month at the Harris Theater, I enjoyed the Rembrandt version even more.

Part of that had to do with the richer, more intimate acoustics of Nichols Concert Hall — an ideal venue for chamber music — part to the infectious verve, spontaneity and abundance of feeling that marked Sunday’s tight collaboration by Robert and Sheila Hanford, Cook, Neuman, Taylor and Hersh. The extra oomph they brought to all those luscious Tchaikovsky tunes made all the difference.

Here’s to Rembrandt’s next 25 years.

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