

June 1, 2008

Cover - People & Ideas in Profile June in Buffalo

Published: June 1, 2008

Transcriptions by Julia Lu

[Ed. Note: This month, NewMusicBox shines light on June in Buffalo, one of the most vibrant summertime festivals dedicated entirely to contemporary music. We are pleased to feature an interview with artistic director David Felder and articles detailing the vital role the festival plays in fostering composers at the very beginning stages of their careers. —RN]

Inside a university dormitory, a smattering of young composers gather, huddling together various chairs and couches in order to create a makeshift lounge-like environment. Someone throws a string quartet on the boombox, but nobody really listens, opting instead to socialize and drink beer. Besides, their ears have been saturated by contemporary music all day long, and well into the evening—in the form of masterclasses, one-on-one sessions, concerts, and rehearsals. This is the June in Buffalo that I experienced ten years ago, so I was delighted to see similar late-night hangouts, heart-to-hearts, and ping-pong matches taking place inside the dorms at last year's festival.

No, I wasn't participating in the festival this time around—I'm no longer a "young" composer by any stretch of the imagination. I was hanging out in the dorms because I asked June in Buffalo's artistic director David Felder if I could entrench myself with the student composers in order to collect some editorial fodder. Believe me, the déjà vu factor was a bit overwhelming at first, but I quickly slipped right into the diverse mix of young composers who were already halfway through the rewardingly grueling week.

Inside Pages:

Different Trains of Thought—What Sets June in Buffalo Apart?
Making June in Buffalo Tick—A Talk with David Felder
Bonding Experience—What a Difference a Week Makes
Survival Guide—Suggestions to Enhance Your June in Buffalo Experience

While the conditions of the dorms and the late-night activities haven't changed much over the years, the cast of characters at the festival had. Each year, composers with a good amount of name recognition are invited to mentor the twenty-or-so younger participants. Back in 1998 during my first visit to June in Buffalo, I had the privilege of sipping whiskey with Vinko Globokar as we discussed which types of squeak toy parts work best lodged inside trombone mouthpieces; chatted about installation art with Kevin Volans; got my music dissed by Mario Davidovsky; and in turn, I ignored Donald Erb all together. And that's what June in Buffalo is all about: a multiplicity of opinions and aesthetic approaches implausibly united by everyone's unquestionable passion for the art of modern composition. It's not about holding hands and singing "Kum Ba Yah." But those open to such an experience will probably glean more wisdom from the festival than those more inclined to stick with what they know. And from judging from the crop of students in 2007, they seemed genuinely eager to hear what the faculty composers—David Felder, John Harbison, Steve Reich, Roger Reynolds, and Charles Wuorinen—had to say on all subjects musical.

There is no singular way to define the June in Buffalo experience, and with over 500 composers having gone through its rite of passage, there are exponentially more anecdotes, triumphs, dramas, failures, and gossip to build an entire mythology around. But one of the things that energizes the festival is its lack of anything quintessential; instead there's always a palpable sense of discovery in the air.

—RN

June 1, 2008

June in Buffalo

Different Trains of Thought—What Sets June in Buffalo Apart?

By Randy Nordschow

Published: June 1, 2008

After tossing that silly-looking mortarboard into the air and thus cutting the umbilical chord of grad school, many young composers are faced, unprepared, with the confounding syndrome known as: Now what am I going to do? Even if you aren't graduating, the barren expanse of time until the Fall semester action kicks-in again can leave a composer scratching his or her head with the same question. There is, however, a big sigh of relief that keeps hands from idling, a cure-all that injects large doses of contemporary music—something that seems to hibernate during the warmer months. Yes, summer festivals are a godsend for emerging composers looking to make a mark in the field or maybe just take a few baby steps. While America boasts several stellar summer programs such as Aspen and Tanglewood, which are often garnished with national press coverage, June in Buffalo has been running in the top of the pack for over two decades. So what sets June in Buffalo apart from the rest?



"In terms of the festival profile, June in Buffalo is clearly more focused on contemporary music than Tanglewood or Aspen," according to composer Oliver Schneller, who has participated in all three programs. With the emphasis shifted away from standard repertoire, June in Buffalo tends to invite performers known for their contemporary music chops, such as the Arditti Quartet who read and performed student works in 2007. The origins of the festival can be traced back to Morton Feldman, who founded it in 1975 in an effort to establish a Darmstadt-like atmosphere, where young composers could gather and learn from their elders. As funding became increasingly difficult to come by, the festival was dissolved five years later. Enter artistic director David Felder, the mastermind behind the festival since he resurrected it 1985. Under the guidance of Felder, the festival manages to nurture around 20 participants each year as well as a handful of auditors, who do not have their compositions read or performed as part of the festival.

The number of students allotted to participate in June in Buffalo is another difference that Schneller points out—by contrast, Aspen and Tanglewood only select a handful of composition fellows. "There are pros and cons to both models," he explains. "More composers mean possibly more perspectives, broader exchange and exposure, but also less performances per composer and less attention to the individual in masterclasses or fewer one-on-one lessons."

To June in Buffalo's credit, whatever individual attention is lost as a result of larger class sizes, the sheer amount of diversity among the students and the faculty can often be quite inspiring. According to composer Patrick Castillo, who attended June in Buffalo in 2005 and 2007, "the overall experience of working with such a wide array of composers within a short amount of time was really rewarding." Castillo elaborates that "there was a much more diverse array of languages that people brought to the table last year [2007] than what I experienced the previous time that I was there."

Faculty member John Harbison concurred, remembering that in his past experiences June in Buffalo students used to be "monolithic in their aesthetics, they seemed to come from a very similar perspective. This group [in 2007] is wider and I'm less able to expect what they're going to bring, which is nice." A frequent member of June in Buffalo's faculty, Charles Wuorinen weighs in on the subject, adding that the 2007 participants represent "a change in attitude and a change in quality for the better. They seem to have a seriousness of intent that I haven't always detected and that, of course, is a very encouraging thing since it is going to be up to them to shape the way music turns out."

Sounds as if the attendees in 2008 have a lot to live up to, but this year's festival is going to be a whole different kettle of fish as the festival shifts its focus to electronic music. The faculty composers include Charles Dodge, Cort Lippe, Roberto Morales, Miller Puckette, Morton Subotnick, Ben Thigpen, and Hans Tutschku. The pool of performers available to perform student works includes the famed German group Ensemble for Intuitive Music, as well as members of Ensemble SurPlus and the New York New Music Ensemble. Nicholas Isherwood will return to the festival to sing some Stockhausen accompanied by composer/sound projectionist Gerard Pape. The fun begins on June 2, 2008.

June 1, 2008

Cover - People & Ideas in Profile

June in Buffalo

Survival Guide—Suggestions to Enhance Your June in Buffalo Experience

By Randy Nordschow

Published: June 1, 2008

If some day you are lucky enough to be chosen to participate as a student-participant for a future June in Buffalo festival—or if you fancy a little trip down memory lane, Buffalo style—here a handful of tips to know before you go (or wish you knew ahead of time).

Lug a tons of scores with you.

Yes, I know how stupid this sounds, but in order to avoid burdening your significant other with a trip to the nearest FedEx office, even if you think you won't need that stupid piano piece you wrote five years ago, bring it. And bring multiple copies of it too. The fact is you are going to be showing your music to a lot of people. You might want to strategize here. If you know a particular faculty member has an expertise in a certain area that one of your compositions addresses, then it's best to have that composition in your suitcase. The point to bringing multiple copies is so your fellow student can follow along while a faculty composer listens to and critiques the work. Besides, you might want to unload a copy to that brilliant pianist you just met.

Pack a jacket and umbrella.

You can leave the snowshoes at home, but seriously, the weather in upstate New York can get cold—even during the first week of June. That said, also bring some shorts and sandals. If you've never experienced a 40-degree change in temperature in under a week, you're in for the thrill ride of your life.

Bring some party music.

By this I do not mean the latest Bang on a Can All-Stars album. After listening to contemporary music all day and all night, you will need some Justin Timberlake, MGMT, or whatever floats your boat, cleans out your ears, or makes a good backdrop for boozing it up—if that's your thing.

Take an iPod dock or a boombox (or in some cases earplugs).

Yes, it will take up a lot of room in your luggage, but this will guarantee that your corner of the dorms will be the after-concert party meeting ground. However, if you know you are misanthropic and will in no way, shape, or form hangout with the amazing people that you would otherwise meet at June in Buffalo, some earplugs would be recommended.

Always have some granola bars in your bag.

Unless you actually enjoy Burger King's breakfast offerings, then something to munch on while you make the 15-minute migration from the dorms to the music building really comes in handy. With such a tight schedule, and very limited dining options, it's best to have something to graze on handy at all times. (Buffalo is the first, and only, municipality to have served, unannounced to me, a deep-fried veggie burger—it was a disgusting grease-sponge, but I was starving. Oh, and those famous wings you've heard about are very messy, so carry extra Wet-Naps.)

Rent a car or simply befriend someone with a car as soon as possible.

This is urgent. You do not want to be trapped on campus the entire week. There are beer runs to make, rations to procure, and places to see beyond the University at Buffalo campus.

Visit the music library.

Even if you're bibliophobic, make a pilgrimage to the music department's library. Get your geek on. They have an amazing collection of scores and recordings, and you can check your email to boot. Interesting aside: There's a little note penned by the bookbinding outfit the library farms out work to inside Gérard Grisey's Prologue from Les Espaces Acoustiques declaring the tome to be the largest item they've ever bound.

Get off campus any chance you get.

I know, Buffalo doesn't sound that glamorous as far as sightseeing goes. But they do have the amazing Albright-Knox Art Gallery, which has a surprisingly deep collection of contemporary art. Don't miss the James Turrell, if it's still on display. Believe me, you're going to want to have more than one off-campus meal, so hassle that friend with the car you met on day one and find a good lunch spot.

Listen more closely to arguments you disagree with.

It's a lot more interesting to learn about points of view that you happen to disagree with than it is to dismiss things outright. But you already knew that.

Be sure to thank David Felder, J.T. Rinker, and Jessica Yacovoni for the fantastic experience. They deserve to hear it.

