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June in Buffalo: Composers Hear Their Music, and Not Just in Their Heads

By *ALLAN KOZINN*

BUFFALO — In the 25 years he has directed the new-music festival June in Buffalo, the composer David Felder has streamlined certain aspects of the program. This festival has always been as much about training young composers as about performances of music by their established elders, and it is unlikely to grow beyond its single-week format. “It’s very intensive over one week,” Mr. Felder said during an interview between sessions on Monday, “and what we’d like is for people to leave exhausted, and thrilled with what they got, and not ready to complain too much.”

Also a constant is the number of young composers June in Buffalo can accommodate, although this year it is slightly higher than usual — 25 participants (the designation for those who will hear their works performed) and three auditors, who will attend seminars, workshops and concerts but whose music will not be played.

“The basic format is that the composers are here to get what we hope are favorable performances of their pieces so that they really can evaluate what their piece is all about,” Mr. Felder said. “That was not the case at all when I was younger. I write some very challenging music, and you would get a not very representative performance of the piece. And you can’t really evaluate whether or not you’ve screwed up until you hear it performed as you’ve written it.”

The composers whose works are played leave Buffalo with a recording — a necessary calling card these days — although Mr. Felder has told them that it is for their own promotional use, not for commercial release.

“We always tell them that,” Mr. Felder said, “but we have had several instances in which composers released the recordings, and we’ve had complaints from the performers, who were not paid. I’m hoping the composers get the idea; otherwise we’ll have to do something like give them an mp3 instead of a CD, and that would be a pity, because it means degraded sound, and that would defeat the purpose of giving them a recording.”

The importance of good recordings for a composer is being pounded home this year: François Eckert is leading a two-day, six-hour workshop in which he is teaching the student composers how to run a recording session, with discussions of topics like how to mark scores so that

session players can read them efficiently, and how to choose the right microphone for the instruments or voices being recorded. It is heavily technical, Mr. Felder acknowledged, but added that these days, composers intent on promoting their work not only need printed scores but well-made recordings as well.

One thing has changed significantly is how the young composers' works will be critiqued. In past years, established composers have held master classes – as they do at Tanglewood and elsewhere – at which they comment on the participants' scores.

“This year,” Mr. Felder said, “we’re having what we call participant forums. The idea is that they will have opportunities to present their work to each other for discussion. But some composers seem to feel burdened by the idea of having a master composer hold court, essentially, and talk about their pieces.

“We’ve had a number of instances of tears over the last few years. I don’t know whether it’s that some of the kids are more sensitive, or some of the more senior folks are more brutal than they used to be. It’s hard to know, but all that didn’t happen in the past. People have different theories about it. One composer has a theory that they’ve been told that there are no standards and that anything they want to do is O.K., so when someone tells them that what they’re doing isn’t O.K. – that it doesn’t work – they’re completely unused to it. That may be true, I don’t know.

“So we’re trying it this way, and I’ll be interested in seeing whether or not there are any tears. My experience is that sometimes their student colleagues can be much harder, because there’s the whole competitive aspect.”

In any case, Mr. Felder said, next year he plans to return to the master-class format.