

A Celebration Of Sounds

June in Buffalo brings the new, the different, the unusual and the challenging to audiences at UB and around town

By **Mary Kunz Goldman**

NEWS CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

June in Buffalo, the University at Buffalo's annual festival of new music, captures the sound heard 'round the world. Scant days before the festival is set to start, participants are all over the globe.

Eliot Fisk, the celebrated guitarist joining the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra for the final concert, can't talk because he is packing to commute to Salzburg the next day for his teaching job at the Salzburg Mozarteum.

Robert Beaser, the composer whose guitar concerto Fisk is playing, is even tougher to reach. He is in Beijing. The Chinese government has blocked Skype, and even his email is out of commission. Communication is a challenge, to say the least.

Back home in Buffalo, in the concert office at Slee Hall, J.T. Rinker, who runs June in Buffalo with composer and professor David Felder, laughs sympathetically at the situation. The days before June in Buffalo, he says, are the calm before the storm, following months of frantic back-and-forth.

"The week before the festival, you don't hear anything," he says. Then everyone arrives, and you hear—well, everything.



Julia Wolfe Founded the experimental group with her husband. She will be teaching.

June in Buffalo has been a tradition at UB since 1975, when it was launched by Morton Feldman, the UB music professor who was an internationally renowned exponent of avant-garde music.

Riding the wave of experimentation that also engulfed the BPO and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, UB rolled out the red carpet for avant-garde composers from all over the world.

Dropped in 1980 for budget reasons, the festival was revived in 1986 by Felder, who was new at UB then.

Over the years the festival has played host to the cream of international avant-garde music. This year, it welcomes an eminent lineup of composers: not only Beaser and Felder but also Julia Wolfe, Pulitzer Prize winner Steven Stucky and three-time Pulitzer runner-up Fred Lerdahl.

June in Buffalo wins great publicity for the city in certain intellectual circles. The New York Times covered its 35th anniversary, in 2010. “In Low- Key Buffalo, a New-Music Milestone,” the headline read.

As ambitious as June in Buffalo is, though, it remains under the radar of most Buffalonians. Some events over the years, such as Philip Glass’ appearance in 2003, have drawn crowds. But even the Times story, while admiring, points out that the festival keeps a low profile.

This year, that could change. June in Buffalo is wrapping up its last concert by featuring a work that could almost be called mainstream. That is Robert Beaser’s guitar concerto.

Fisk has played it before with BPO Music Director JoAnn Falletta. They played it at the last concert of the financially troubled Syracuse Symphony. Falletta was thrilled when Felder, planning this year’s June in Buffalo, suggested the composer.

“David is such a great colleague,” Falletta says. “He is always asking, ‘What do you feel about this?’ Or, ‘If we don’t do him or her this year, we’ll do it in a future season.’ When he mentioned Bob Beaser, I was so excited.”

“Mainstream” is a bad word in some intellectual circles. When Fisk premiered the

concerto in 2009, New York Times chief music critic Anthony Tommasini called it “too safely neo-Romantic.”

But with its athletic virtuosity, unapologetic melodies and elements of bluegrass, the concerto could appeal to more than the narrow audience usually attracted to June in Buffalo. It could help more listeners discover UB’s unpredictable festival.

‘Extraordinary things’

Just defining “new music” is a challenge.

It’s not, say, Norah Jones, or Yanni, or even a niche-market jazz artist like Esperanza Spalding. Complicating things further, occasionally the worlds of new music and pop music overlap. Finnish pop singer Bjork has inspired classical composers to write music for her. Frank Zappa, too, has classical cache.

“New music can be categorized as anything written recently, but new music in the context of June in Buffalo is primarily composers that primarily write for traditional Western classical music instruments,” says Rinker.

“I guess another part of the festival is also, a lot of the composers are affiliated with academia. In this case, [Steven] Stucky teaches at Cornell, Beaser at Juilliard, Fred Lerdahl at Columbia. And Julia Wolfe does some teaching at New York University.”

Common sense would suggest that the academic aspect of new music is a factor in the music’s niche appeal. Throughout the history of June in Buffalo, grants, fellowships and funding have allowed composers to pursue their intellectual goals without worrying much about the audience.

Theoretically, that could be seen as a good thing.

But some composers, free to explore their wildest ideas, have left mainstream audiences behind. Casual listeners can have trouble understanding works involving electronica, mathematical formulas or atonal principles. Add in the time commitment required to sample a new work –it’s not like viewing a painting–and you could have one reason why listeners tend to stay away.

Beaser, when he is finally able to get through on the phone from Beijing, admits that audiences have learned, rightly or wrongly, to fear the avant-garde.

“June in Buffalo started at a moment in history where there was a pretty big gap between composers and the audience,” he says. “And if you sort of look historically from the ’60s through the ’80s, the postwar era in general was a particularly difficult period in that regard. While I know the music history of America and the world quite well –I am very, very enamored of works produced during that era –there’s no question that in some cases, composers were more interested in research than they were in communication.”

Fisk, commenting from Salzburg, has noticed a worse dynamic in Europe.

“Europe has subsidized art that people don’t understand,” he says. “Nobody knows what the (heck) the music is about.”

Beaser sees the situation brightening. The gap is closing, he believes, between composers and audience.

“Avant-garde music has gotten maybe a deservedly bad rap in some ways,” he says. “In the last 25 years, there has really been a sea change in this regard. I believe a lot of composers are really writing both highly communicative music and music that is forward looking. If the audience would just shed their earlier preconception of who-cares-if-they-listen mentality and start to open their ears just a little bit, I think they’ll find just a wide variety of things out there.”

‘Weird keys, flat keys’

A look behind the scenes at Beaser’s concerto shows the often humorous dynamics of music written in the here and now.

“He’s very, very real,” Fisk says from Salzburg, where it is midnight.

He brings up another Beaser composition, “Mountain Songs.” They are simple but creative duet arrangements of Appalachian folk melodies (such as “Shenandoah,” which Fisk is playing at June in Buffalo on Thursday). Fisk has played them with a variety of musical partners, including flutist Paula Robison and celebrity clarinetist Richard

Stoltzman.

Stoltzman, he says, loves Beaser's music.

"Dick would say, 'Beaser's the real thing.' Bobby's always had this amazing aural sensitivity, having an ear. He's always had it, ever since I've known him. He has a superior ear, a much better ear than the rest of us. He's a real teacher like that. It's a gift.

"His mother invented Elmer's Glue. She was a chemist. She gave it up to raise the boys. Their father, who passed away four or five years ago, was a very brilliant doctor. His specialty was diabetes." The family was foreign to music, Fisk jokes. "Some musical geniuses just dropped in."

Fisk and Beaser met years ago as classmates at Yale. The concerto had its roots way back in the 1980s, when Beaser first began thinking about it. In some ways, the composer jokes, it's still not finished.

"I was just in Munich, talking to a guitar professor there," he says. "I said, if it were for any other instrument than guitar, it would have been done a long time ago, but because the guitar is such a complicated instrument, with a complicated way of producing sounds, Eliot and I are both constantly fiddling with it."

Fisk, who studied with guitar legend Andrés Segovia and is famous for his technique, corroborates Beaser's words with a bit of a swagger.

"He knows that anything he writes for me might be subject to change," he says. "He's heard me for so many years."

Beaser is not a guitarist himself. Fisk, with his spirit of adventure, sees that as an advantage. Nonguitarists, he believes, see the guitar in unconventional ways.

"He has an amazing instinct for the instrument," he says. "He goes off into weird keys, flat keys. No guitarist composers ever do that. It has been through very many versions.

"The aspiration is so immense, it breaks all the boundaries. It's the wildest thing that's been written for me. I've never attempted anything as challenging. He makes it work," he adds. "Of all the great composers I've worked with, he's an absolute standout. He's

just so original. So creative, with an amazing imagination.”

The stars align

Beaser sees his presence at June in Buffalo as perhaps opening up new doors.

“Ten years ago, 15 years ago, I wouldn’t be at this festival,” he says. “Someone who writes relatively tonal music would not be invited.

“I represent one solution to something which a lot of composers are exploring in different and energetic ways. I feel much better about the ability of music to reach an audience. I would encourage audiences to just come back, and don’t think that it’s this big, gray area where composers are writing for themselves.”

Rinker, though, says that Beaser’s appearance is not part of a conscious effort to broaden the audience.

“It wasn’t necessarily specifically designed to widen the appeal of the festival,” he said. “When Robert Beaser was invited to come, he mentioned that he had been working with Fisk, and that JoAnn Falletta had done the guitar concerto with the Syracuse Symphony. It seemed it could be something the BPO could produce, the festival could produce. It was mostly some stars aligning in that way –as far as having someone more mainstream, more crossover in that regard.”

Rinker echoes Beaser’s advice to June in Buffalo newcomers: Listen with an open mind.

He offers a few enticing suggestions of performances to try.

“There’s a rare opportunity to see Roberto Fabbriciani play,” he says. “He rarely comes to the United States. He is legendary for working with experimental European composers.” Fabbriciani, a master flutist, performs at 7:30 p.m. Monday in Baird Recital Hall.

“As far as spectacle and production, the Signal concert on Saturday evening could be a good choice,” Rinker adds, with irresistible enthusiasm. “Signal’s going to be a large ensemble, 25 players.” Signal’s concert, Rinker adds, includes Julia Wolfe’s “Impatience,” which involves a silent film that screens along with the music. The concert

takes place at Lippes Concert Hall in Slee Hall at 7:30 p.m. Saturday.

June in Buffalo winds up Sunday with the BPO playing music that runs the June in Buffalo gamut: Felder's "Incendio"; Lerdaahl's "Cross-Currents"; and Stucky's "Jeu de Timbres."

The last piece heard will be Beaser's Guitar Concerto. It will end the concert, and the festival, on a novel note.

As Falletta says, "There is nothing wrong with being accessible.

"It's not going to sound like Beethoven, but there is no reason it can't communicate and reach out to the audience in completely modern terms."

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