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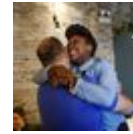
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Fall preview: Stefan Hersh nurtures a high-tech performance space



By HOWARD REICH
CHICAGO TRIBUNE | SEP 08, 2019







Stefan Hersh in Guarneri Hall: A plan to reach classical listeners in concert and online. (Jose M. Osorio / Chicago Tribune)

It's a question every classical music presenter must ask: Where will tomorrow's audiences come from?

The days when tickets are scarce for symphonic and operatic performances appear to have passed – at least in the United States, where pop culture becomes ever more dominant and the classical audience is slowly aging and shrinking.

One Chicago musician has decided to take on the challenge in a fascinating way: via Guarneri Hall, a non-profit venue designed for live performance but also for the virtual world.

Violinist Stefan Hersh – founder of Darnton & Hersh Fine Violins – has created Guarneri Hall as a way of reaching far larger audiences than the room's 60 seats can accommodate on the third floor of 11 E. Adams St.

“The initial impetus for this started a dozen years ago – I have a for-profit business that could conceivably support a non-profit entity,” explains Hersh, referring to the violin dealership he established in 2006.

“The idea was that classical music, and music literacy generally, is challenged in the modern era. We need a lot of ingenuity in repackaging classical music so that we can draw people into the languages that are familiar to them now: namely video. And hopefully grow a new generation of music lovers.

“I just don’t think we can reach people if we don’t have a visual message,” adds Hersh. “How many people listen to just audio? Or they listen just as background. I think the path now is to reach a visual society.”

To that end, Hersh and colleagues have built Guarneri Hall, conceiving it as “really an audio-visual production facility that seats about 60 people,” says Hersh. “More of what I want to do is produce content that lives on the web.”

So Hersh plans to pick up the tempo of producing classical performances, documenting them via state-of-the-art audio-visual recording equipment and distributing the results online.

Acousticians were involved in the design of Guarneri Hall from the outset, says Hersh. That’s evident from various Guarneri Hall features, including its asymmetric planes: Walls and ceiling are pitched at particular angles, to improve sound production and reproduction. Microphones and cameras have been built in, out of sight, giving the room a clean, spacious look.

“What I’ve experienced in my performing career is that recording spaces were dead, and musicians didn’t feel good playing in them,” says Hersh, who was principal second violin of the Minnesota Orchestra from 1991-95 and associate concertmaster of the Vancouver Symphony from 1998-2001.

“And concert halls are beautiful but difficult to record in.”

With Guarneri Hall, named for the revered 18th century violin maker, Hersh hopes to have launched a space that’s appealing to the ear and the eye – especially for those who will experience the content online.

Will Guarneri Hall rent out the space to people who want to create their own music videos?

“That’s not really the mission,” says Hersh. “It’s not that we wouldn’t do it. But what we’re really looking for is projects that we can help raise the money for and be involved in.”

Hersh points out that there’s still some fine-tuning to be done at Guarneri Hall, and that he plans to post signage that will help lead visitors to its somewhat hidden location inside a Loop high-rise.

How will he know when Guarneri Hall, which attained its 501(c)3 non-profit status last December, is a hit?

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Flutist Anastasiya Ganzenko will perform 6:30 p.m. Oct. 2; violinist Benjamin Baker with pianist Daniel Lebhart, 6:30 p.m. Nov. 14; NEXUS Chamber Music with oboist Michael Hensch, 6:30 p.m. Nov. 4; at Guarneri Hall, 11 E Adams St., third floor; 847-780-6720 or <https://guarnerihall.org>.

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Howard Reich



Howard Reich is the Tribune's Emmy-winning arts critic; author of six books, including "The Art of Inventing Hope: Intimate Conversations with Elie Wiesel"; and writer-producer of three documentaries. He holds two honorary doctoral degrees and served on the Pulitzer music jury four times, including for the first jazz winner, "Blood on the Fields."

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