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A Brooklyn Buffet

Local Cellist Launches New Music Fest



By ANDY BATTAGLIA

When Mike Block isn't traveling the world and performing in high style, he can

sometimes be found in his resoundingly plain apartment in uptown Hamilton Heights, with next to nothing on the walls and décor that includes a plundered mini-van seat—which, for a while, counted as his sole piece of furniture. It may lack for ambience, but open space suits the 28-year-old well when he picks up his cello and plays, as he did on a recent Sunday afternoon while talking about his homegrown idea for a polyglot new concert series called GALA NYC.

"So much of the stress of being a professional musician is touring and going out on the road, supposedly in the service of finding people to play for," said Mr. Block, who lives in his apartment about four months out of the year. "I've flown to Germany to play one gig and fly back. But a year ago I played a house concert at a friend's apartment for 50 people, a super-appreciative audience, and it was one of the most fulfilling performances I've ever done. So I started racking my brain about how to make a really satisfying concert experience—at home in New York."

It was after he secured a Master's degree from the Juilliard School in 2006 that Mr. Block fully joined the itinerant population of professional musicians who wander the world, drifting from gig to gig. His most illustrious appointment is as a cellist in Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble, with which he recently completed a three-week tour of storied recital halls. But then he also plays solo shows in clubs, group gatherings with rock bands, and earthy outings with a bluegrass act for which he rides around in vans on the busy festival circuit.

"The cool thing about musicians is we get to see different strata," he said. "Sometimes we're staying in five-star hotels and getting taken out to nice restaurants; other times we're crammed in a van and sharing rooms. Every few weeks I'm touring with a different group in a different genre, and playing something completely different. With GALA NYC, I'm trying to take all those different experiences and have all those different kinds of musicians interact with each other and create something new."

For the first concert in his ambitious series, which will run at the Brooklyn Lyceum in Park Slope every Saturday in May and then continue as a biweekly event in the fall, Mr. Block called on kindred spirits from markedly different realms in the hope of jamming them all together. "How does a classical violinist who can't improvise interact with a jazz musician?" he asked.

Earlier this week, as Mr. Ma (who called Mr. Block "an enormously talented and great musician" who "takes on any music fearlessly") was busy rehearsing for his Thursday-night concert at Carnegie Hall, Mr. Block was preparing for a decidedly different sort of affair. No ornate palace, the Brooklyn Lyceum—a small, 100-year-old building on Fourth Avenue that once housed Public Bath #7—is an endearingly ramshackle establishment that plays home to weird theater and many different kinds of arts events.

"What I love about it is that it's not a traditional classical concert space, with a super-nice stage and chairs in the dark," Mr. Block said. "We're open to try pretty much anything. We could throw footballs across the room at bass drums if we wanted to."

Some of his plans suggest the real possibility of such playful trials, including a game piece for which he wants musicians to improvise a soundtrack while members of the audience share stories of their day. But mostly, GALA NYC is about gathering a bunch of seriously invested musicians, mixing them up in unorthodox groupings, and listening to what happens.

"We get mired, especially in classical music, in the idea of tradition and following the right way, but when we do that, we don't let music live," said Anastasia Khitruk, an accomplished classical violinist who will play on Saturday.

Kyle Sanna, a guitarist who will perform the same night, in part with a group led by Syrian clarinetist Kinan Azmeh, agreed. "It's going to be pretty spontaneous," he said. "It's not like we're trying to 'fuse' this and that. We're basically just getting together a bunch of talented musicians to see what can happen. Musicians are comfortable moving between different genres, and I think audiences are ready for anything. New York is not a city of purists."