

Q2 Blog

Chance Encounter on the Tiber

Composer Lisa Bielawa's "Lend Me Your Ears" Blog Continues

Monday, July 26, 2010 - 12:00 AM

By [Lisa Bielawa](#)



Performance of Chance Encounter
(Marco Martinelli)

Greetings from hot and sticky Rome, where--in stark contrast to equally hot and sticky New York City--air conditioning is deemed bad for the human organism and therefore largely avoided. But the thick air gives the city a slow pace, so there is time now to reflect and report on what turned out to be a very busy spring of music-making.

Perhaps my most involving project was a collaboration with another Rome Prize Fellow Robert Hammond (whom some of you may know through his work as the Co-Founder and President of Friends of the High Line), *Chance Encounter on the Tiber*. The project combined an urban experiment--placing 100 red movable chairs in an under-used public space--with performances of my 35-minute piece for soprano Susan Narucki and twelve instruments, *Chance Encounter*. In the Rome performances, my hometown collaborators Brooklyn Rider came together with the Roman group Blue Chamber Orchestra, forming a bicultural band. Together, the chairs and the unexpected performances took over two vastly contrasting public spaces in Rome: a central spot on the mostly-neglected walkway along the Tiber River on May 31:



Photo credit: Corey Brennan

...and the new MAXXI museum of contemporary art designed by Zaha Hadid in a preview performance on May 30:



Photo credit: Marco Martinelli

Chance Encounter itself as a composition is specifically designed to break down the conventions of concert music: assigned seats in fixed rows, performers on defined stage spaces, paid admission and fixed, ritual attention. A 2007 project of Creative Capital, the piece was originally designed so that it is not prescribed where and how the audience should or might sit to enjoy the music. The twelve musicians are in two separate locations, approximately half a city block away from each other. They arrive one or two at a time, over the course of seven minutes, by various means:

In Rome, participating musicians arrive by taxi:



Photo credit: Marco Martinelli

In New York City, participating musicians also arrive by taxi:



Photo credit: April Thibeault

...so that it is not clear exactly when the performance has officially begun. Similarly, at the end of the 35-minute piece, performers leave one or several at a time, so that when the piece is over, there are no musicians present. There are many more photos of the events on the [Tiber](#) and [MAXXI](#) on the project [website](#).

Robert was inspired by William Whyte's studies in *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, in which Whyte found that one of the most successful tools in creating vibrant spaces was the use of movable chairs. Robert's movable chairs gave people an added sense of ownership of their own experience. They actually had control over how they sat: Do they face the performers? Do they listen and watch the water? Do they walk around the space?

The soprano's [sung 'libretto'](#) is comprised entirely of utterances that Susan and I overheard over the course of a full year of travel, in transient public spaces around the world--Rome, Taipei, Anchorage, Salzburg, Dallas and beyond. Here is a snippet of the song *Drama/Self-Pity* (which will be released this coming October on the Orange Mountain Music label):

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The process of getting a public-space project on its feet in Rome was quite an adventure. We ended up getting a whole team of Roman partners to help us navigate these unfamiliar waters, plus the Rome-New York multidisciplinary arts organization [Eternal Tiber / Tevereterno](#), founded by Kristin Jones for the revival of Rome's Tiber River. After a rather Kafka-esque process of meetings and clerical rituals and setbacks, we received an [approval letter listing the 23 governing agencies](#) that had to sign off on our authorization to use the site. Unseasonable flood waters covered our performance site until just a week before. Rehearsals had to be in two languages. Susan's flight arrived five hours before the first preview performance at MAXXI.

Unlike the Tiber, the [MAXXI site](#) had abundant pedestrian traffic that allowed the chairs to work their magic: couples kissed, families created picnics, teenagers smoked and talked. The previous day at MAXXI, when the museum offered free admission to pre-registered guests, the piazza was only used as a backdrop for photos and as a way in and out of the museum. With the chairs, the space became an active communal space.

The sound of the musicians outside the MAXXI was superb, with the soprano and half of the instruments underneath Hadid's extended overhanging gallery, and all of the sounds reflecting off of her curved glass and concrete shapes.

The sound at the Tiber was grittier--part of a texture that included the flowing river, surges of traffic, and wind. The two performances on the Tiber were strikingly different from one another. The 6:30pm audience was informal, chaotic--many were on their way home from work. They used the chairs in a broad variety of ways and set them in a variety of orientations--not always facing a group of musicians, but some in clusters or facing the water. On the periphery, people continued conversations or read while listening to the music. They did not feel compelled to behave like a concert audience, but felt free to walk around and hear the piece from different locations within the space, which is really a wonderful way to hear the piece. People also gathered on the bridge and upper walkway, watching and listening from above.

6:30 p.m audience:



Photo credit: Marco Martinelli

The 8 p.m. audience was a concert-going audience – more formally dressed. They moved the chairs into a half-ring facing the soprano and behaved more like they were at a traditional music event, using the chairs to create an outdoor concert hall:



Photo credit: Marco Martinelli

It was interesting to see that different groups of people were able to take the same musical piece and the same chairs and spatial environment and create two entirely different experiences. This was one of the most satisfying manifestations of the spirit of the project.

It was wonderful to have so many from the [American Academy in Rome](#) community there. The [AAR blog](#) gives a terrific view-from-the-outside of the project, and some great photos too.

Chance Encounter will receive its Canadian premiere on October 3, 2010 in Vancouver, as part of the [Music on Main Festival](#).

[More from Lisa Bielawa's "Lend Me Your Ears" Blog](#)

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Kenneth Bennett Lane from Lake Hiawatha, NJ

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Rome on the Tiber's banks is amongst the most stirring places for its hovering of an aura, of an ambience of reflection as to times that were, and are, indelible.

I remember the Caracalla concerts; the Rome Opera House with Mussolini's name centered over the proscenium alongside Mozart and Verdi; the thought of Tosca jumping from the ramparts into the Tiber, a physical IMPOSSIBILITY since the Tiber is much too far from the Castel Sant' Angelo; and the magnificent concerts one sometimes hears at the Vatican and other churches. San Antonio, Texas, used to have concerts on its river banks and they, too, were nostalgic and , full of the beauty of nature and the nature of tonal sonorities that elicit pleasure.

The advantage of un-amplified music, as in the concerts on the Tiber, is that we hear the actual timbre of the individual instruments and the individual singers. Modern day audiences are so used to hearing highly amplified music that they do not realize that most untrained singers, without that support, would be inaudible. Opera singers and classically trained lieder singers' voices "carry" well, even in the large spaces. The proper vocal technique and, of course, the strong healthy voice, are essential for vast-sized auditoriums or outdoor stadiums.

Aug. 11 2010 09:53 PM



Valerio Borgianelli Spina from Rome

Brava! Beautiful performances into the sticky Rome

Jul. 28 2010 04:43 AM



Michael Meltzer

I think there's a "catch-22" in the making. Ms. Bielawa's free-for-all performance still benefits from the mutual respect of performers & audience and the patience and good audience manners everyone learned over the years in a structured environment.

After a while, that won't necessarily be the case. After a generation of no structure, just what would we have?

Jul. 26 2010 05:29 AM



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