

The high-quality free classical concert model?

Priceless

By David Patrick Stearns
Inquirer Music Critic



Russian pianist Konstantin Lifschitz captivated audiences in his Town Hall Free for All Bach concert.

Maybe there's still no free lunch in America, but free Bach was heaped upon New York audiences - high quality, no strings attached - when every last note of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* was performed at Town Hall on 43d Street on Sunday.

Over an afternoon and evening concert, Russian pianist Konstantin Lifschitz played all 48 preludes and fugues (49 if you count his encored C major prelude of Book I), in an event tailored to those left behind by Memorial Day evacuation to various seashores.

If you didn't hear about it in advance, that may be because you don't read Korean or Chinese. Such are the ethnic publications where Town Hall's five-year-old concert series, named Free for All, advertises. Among seasoned music lovers, word-of-mouth communication brought in full houses in April when soprano Dawn Upshaw made her first area appearance since cancer treatments. Or two weeks ago, when Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg and Anne-Marie McDermott reprised their all-Brahms program heard this season in Philadelphia.

Though free concerts often imply that the talent can't pull its weight at the box office, past seasons scheduled the popular Andre Watts. He canceled (what's new?) but opened a slot for Lifschitz, a former child prodigy who tends to thoroughly captivate whoever hears him. His Bach marathon was a return appearance at Free for All. Daniel Barenboim played *The Well-Tempered Clavier* over two days at Carnegie Hall not long ago, but Lifschitz's one-day traversal had the considerable appeal of alternating between Book I and Book II, showing the composer's creative responses to the same challenges 22 years apart. The pianist thinks of it as a juxtaposition of innocence and experience.

"This morning, somebody called and said, 'Is it really free?' Yes it's really free," said cofounder Jacqueline Taylor. "Some people can't believe it."

"You know that classical-music concerts never cover their costs," said cofounder Omus Hirshbein. "Why not raise more money and give it away?"

Could it be any simpler? Perhaps - if our civilization didn't complicate it so much.

Free classical music comes and goes everywhere. Free lawn seats at the Philadelphia Orchestra's Mann Center concerts will be more widely available this year, though that experience is more often about picnics than communing with Bach. The baroque-music ensemble Tempesta di Mare, which does encourage communion with Bach, was free-ish (donations were encouraged) in its early seasons here.

Free downloads of great classical music performances are available to the Web-savvy. On Sept. 23, Washington National Opera simulcasts *La Boheme* by satellite, free, to schools including Temple University and Bryn Mawr College. But to automatically welcome all of this isn't healthy. Human nature seems to devalue the free. At free concerts, I've observed people bringing friends more interested in talking than listening, plus small children mainly interested in leaving.

The Town Hall model, however, comes with endless lessons. The season is limited to eight or so weeks in the spring; that limits potential competition with money-charging events. The tickets take on value due to high-caliber talent - plus a two-ticket-per-person rule, and a time and distance commitment to being on 43d Street on Sunday morning. Also, listeners aren't there because they bought a subscription months ago. It's a be-here-now thing.

Special commitments are required from the artists: Ones who charge up to \$75,000 per concert know that Free for All has a \$15,000 cap. "It's a much more rambunctious crowd," said pianist McDermott. "You walk out and they're just buzzing. They hoot and holler sometimes. As far as I'm concerned, they're loving being there. It's the most valuable concert series in New York City."

"Free" also comes with special maneuverability. In halls where audiences have paid \$100 for their seat, the turn-off-the-cell-phone directive won't be too pointed - the way it was at Town Hall, where you're like a party guest respecting house rules. It's true that Salerno-Sonnenberg stopped between Brahms movements to ask a second-row man to stop snapping photos. For Lifschitz, "no flash photography" signs were posted everywhere.

Chances can be taken at Free for All that wouldn't be advisable when playing to an ongoing subscribership, or critics with pencils sharpened. McDermott will be back next season by herself with Bach's *Goldberg Variations* plus a companion piece commissioned for the occasion from unreconstituted modernist Charles Wuorinen.

Free for All was perfect for soprano Upshaw's New York return, her hair still not grown back from chemotherapy, in a program of her favorite songs, no new hurdles to jump. Bach's preludes and fugues are a life's work, one that promises to be hugely rewarding for Lifschitz, and Free for All was an absorbing interim report - astonishingly insightful one minute, just scratching the surface the next. He was free to be less than perfect, which is more interesting than perfect.

Diminished expectations are even healthy from the outreach standpoint. Because this music doesn't exist for thrills or recreation, it consistently attracts a low percentage of the population. But that percentage could be anywhere. That's why it was great to see the Lifschitz crowd, which had the biggest round-the-block lineup of the season, looking like the subway at rush hour with students in T-shirts, teacher types in white

orthopedic shoes, ragingly opinionated retirees, and a good mixture of skin colors. Clearly, the right percentage had been found, particularly since the crowd was more attentive than your average Carnegie Hall goers.

Of course, the music industry can exist only if free is a rare exception. But when free, concerts should be also free of peripheral promotion; at Town Hall, you didn't even see Lifschitz's compact discs sold in the lobby. Everyday life is full of promotional swindles, spam assaults, and advertisement-driven Malware. Art hasn't necessarily stayed clear of that. But here, it can - and does.

Contact music critic David Patrick Stearns at dstearns@phillynews.com.

com. Read his recent work at <http://go.philly.com/>

davidpatrickstearns.