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Where Even Pros Pay to Play

Stage-fright guru Michael Goode has a new project: a sight-reading orchestra for musicians who want to hone their chops, expand their repertoire, or even conquer performance anxiety.

By Deanna Isaacs
July 21, 2006

"WE ARE DESPERATE" was the opening line of a July 4 fax from musician and stagefright guru Michael Goode. Since Jack Helbig profiled him in the Reader two years ago, as the "psychoneuromusicologist" author of *Stage Fright in Musical Performance and Its Relationship to the Unconscious*, Goode has launched a new endeavor, the Chicago Reading Orchestra. Twice a week for the last year he's been summoning colleagues who play at a professional level to the music hall of the Chicago Federation of Musicians on West Randolph, where they pay five bucks each to cover costs and sit down for a couple of hours of sight-reading under the baton of conductor Kim Diehnelt. The idea is to exercise their chops, expand their repertoire, and practice a skill required for symphony auditions, Goode says. But last week the CRO became a new source of anxiety.

Goode, the CRO's manager and principal trumpet, had arranged something special. At its July 13 session the reading orchestra would perform two ambitious new works of music, with the composers— Silk Road competition winner Angel Lam and Loyola faculty member Bjorn Berkhout—in attendance. Lam, eager to hear her piece in professional performance for the first time, had already arranged to come here from New York, but as the date approached Goode found he was coming up seriously short of musicians. "100+ players have backed out on their commitments," he lamented in his



Chicago Reading Orchestra organizer Michael Goode and conductor Kim Diehnelt

Yvette Marie Dostatni



me? depends on what you wanna see. i can drink most people under the table,...

faxed SOS. “[Lam] has already purchased her tickets, will be staying with my wife and I, and has no idea we have only 10 players committed. . . . It is terrible how cruel people can be.” On the night of July 12, Goode was in his Oak Park office, still scrambling, working the phone and hoping to come up with a cohort of least 80. “I sent out 1,000 e-mails. All the hardest things, we’ve already got—a harp player, the goofy percussion equipment. We’re awash in flutes. But I’m having trouble with bassoons. And the string players— in this town there’s an attitude that you don’t do anything unless it’s the last minute. It’s a little bit scary. I have almost half the orchestra to fill.”

Twenty minutes past the announced starting time the next day, 23 players were tuning up in the air-conditioned hum of the union hall. Guests playing erhu and zheng demonstrated their instruments, and Lam introduced her ten-minute work, “Memories From My Previous Lives.” The musicians leaned in to catch her nearly imperceptible account of her inspiration for the piece, a dream she had while meditating when she was 15 years old: “A sky full of twinkling stars, endless fields of red dusts, and people—groups of them—chasing after me.” Then Diehnelt, all in black and reedy as a note on paper, led the group through a balletic score that ranged from bubbling Debussy moments to a flute shriek worthy of a car alarm. When it came time for Berkhout’s piece, described by the composer as “a bit snarly,” the conductor warned the players to fasten their seat belts. A voice from the brass section shouted not to worry: “This is the Las Vegas of orchestras. What plays here, stays here.”

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That’s the point, Goode says. The CRO is meant to be a “safe place” for musicians “to play and work their problems out.” Chief among those problems is the demon he battled himself—stage fright. After repeated episodes of shaky hands, pounding heart, and dry mouth, he made the phenomenon the subject of a master’s thesis he later self-published. In this lightweight tome he presents a brief research review, four composite “case histories” of

his own creation, and the opinion that stage fright stems from the unconscious effect of early negative feedback, usually—as in his own case— from parents. Fixing it, he says, requires “intense analysis into the emotional causes and sources of psychological blockages”—shrinks, support groups, yoga—whatever it takes to get “back in balance from childhood trauma.”

What he doesn’t recommend is the quick fix he says is now the most common solution. According to Goode classical music is losing audiences in part because they’re hearing technically perfect but boring performances. One reason for that is rampant use of drugs that stem performance jitters, primarily the beta-blocker propranolol. Sold under the brand name Inderal, this medication, which lowers heart rate and blood pressure, is intended for patients with cardiac conditions. But over the last 20 years or so it’s become a crutch for classical musicians who use it to get through grueling job auditions and performances. Inderal blocks the adrenaline-fueled fight-or-flight response to stress and, Goode says, also blocks access to the emotional depths necessary for great art. “A conductor of one of the top five orchestras in the world told me 90 percent of the musicians in his orchestra are on betablockers. That’s a problem.” Goode says even Charles Brantigan, a Denver physician and tuba player who did influential early research on Inderal use by musicians, has now backed away from advocating it. Brantigan, however, says he’s an investigator, not an advocate, and his position is unchanged: “On every occasion that this has been studied in a controlled trial the performances have been better on the drugs than off. The idea that it creates a mechanical performance is flat-out wrong.”

When Helbig interviewed Goode he was preparing for an audition with the CSO. “Like a lot of other people, I didn’t advance,” he says. Now he’s teaching, freelancing, writing a new book he says will pick up where the first left off, and consulting on stage fright. “A lot of these hotshot younger players are calling me. They won major jobs, and they’re cracking up. Nobody can tell they’re having problems with stage fright. But they are,

and they're terrified."

The CRO, which Goode says he's establishing as a nonprofit, will play an all-Elgar concert August 13 at the Oak Park Arts Center, 200 N. Oak Park Ave. They're rehearsing for that one.

Miscellany

Goat Island performance group has announced that, after 20 years and nine performances, it's preparing for its own demise. Goat Island member Matthew Goulsh says the thought of continuing was exhausting, while the prospect of ending—once it was presented by director Lin Hixson—was liberating. They'll have the performance to end all performances ready in 2007. . . . Annoyance Theatre, homeless since 2000, finally has opened in 4,000-square-foot quarters in a mixed-use building at 4840 N. Broadway. Annoyance spent \$130,000 on a largely do-it-yourself build-out (designed by ensemble member and architect Gary Rudoren, né Ruderman), has a five-year renewable lease, and is the proud possessor of a liquor license. You don't have to see a show to visit the bar. . . .The further adventures of Frankie J: After escapades that included a night in jail, a foreclosure, and a nine-month hiatus, Frankie J is back serving dinner and improv at 4437 N. Broadway with new partners and a new name, The Spot.



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