

Eighth Blackbird returns to Great Lakes fest as innovators

Mark Stryker, *Detroit Free Press* 3:45 p.m. EDT June 24, 2015



(Photo: Luke Ratray)

CHICAGO – Can Eighth Blackbird really be on the verge of its 20th anniversary?

After all, it seems like just yesterday that the celebrated contemporary music sextet was making its first appearance at the 1997 Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival. The players were in their early 20s then and just a year removed from starting the group at the Oberlin Conservatory.

Eighth Blackbird returns to the Great Lakes festival this week to perform at several concerts. Most notable is Saturday's world premiere of "Hand Eye," an evening-length work by the six composers in the Sleeping Giant collective. They each wrote a movement inspired by a piece of contemporary art owned by Detroiters Maxine and Stuart Frankel, who commissioned the piece.

Inspired by the example of the Kronos Quartet, Eighth Blackbird has created a brand-name less dependent on specific repertoire than on a distinctive concert experience and identity defined by adventure, vibrancy and quality. The group, which has won three Grammy Awards, tackles a wide range of new music from composers as diverse as Steve Reich, Pierre Boulez, David Lang, John Corigliano and Richard Reed Parry.

But the ensemble also has become known for performing from memory, employing choreography and collaborations with theater artists, lighting designers and even puppetry artists.

Equally important, Eighth Blackbird has become an influential model of entrepreneurialism. In the early days the players marketed and managed themselves, securing a string of university residencies (which continue) and eventually incorporating as a nonprofit and building a full-time staff. The current annual budget is about \$800,000.

To put it another way: Eighth Blackbird has been a project dedicated to inventing the future of classical music.

The players took time to talk before a morning rehearsal last month at their studio in Chicago. Percussionist Matthew Duvall did most of the speaking because he was the first on the scene, but others joined as they arrived. The rest of the group includes: Michael Maccaferri, clarinets; Tim Munro, flutes; Yvonne Lam, violin and viola; Lisa Kaplan, piano, and Nicholas Photinos, cello.

(Eighth Blackbird's unique instrumentation derives from a seminal early 20th-Century work by Arnold Schoenberg, "Pierrot Lunaire.")

QUESTION: Did you think you'd still be doing this nearly 20 years later, and that this is what success would look like?

Matthew Duvall: Yes and no. Luckily, we were naive enough to never really think too far ahead and get bogged down by the weight of that. We just plowed ahead. But we never doubted that we'd stay in business. We felt a constant sense of: "This is awesome. What are we going to do next? Let's hustle for the next thing."

Q: How did you build an organizational infrastructure and staff?

Duvall: Right from the beginning, we decided to operate within a business model, which is that when we made a fee, we put 50% into a bank account and we split the other 50% between us. Individually, we also would pay for things like a tank of gas or a ream of paper to print programs. But we kept track of all of those receipts and we slowly went into debt to ourselves. Over time, we would budget an additional 5% or 10% to paying off debt. Everyone eventually got paid off, though it took 7 or 8 years.

The other thing that was very simple but crucial in hindsight was that with six of us we recognized that there was no way we could rehearse with any regularity while trying to manage six different schedules. We decided on a 10 a.m.-1 p.m. rehearsal schedule five days a week. Everyone then worked everything else around that for their odd jobs, teaching or whatever.

Q: You've had a few personnel changes. Have they been difficult?

Duvall: The hard part is always with the existing members, which just feels like a bit of breakup or something. But we've been lucky with Yvonne and Tim.

Q: (To Yvonne Lam) What was it like to join the group?

Lam: Like joining a weird orphan family (laughs). Like suddenly having a bunch of foster siblings.

Q: What's the next step for the group?

Duvall: Conceptually, we're positioning ourselves to make significant shifts toward education. We hope to inaugurate a summer festival in Ojai, Calif., in 2017. It's a generative festival, where we can bring

composers and musicians together to create work that can be performed in other places. Our development goal is have it be tuition free, so we'll have graduate and doctoral students.

We will be playing with participants in the groups, and we hope to teach chamber music — cuing and ensemble mechanics and how we rehearse. We're going to roll up our sleeves and be in the trenches with them.

Next season we'll be an ensemble-in-residence at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. They'll give us galleries as studio space and we'll rehearse publicly doing exactly what we do in the studio. The goal is to bring patrons into the process, as opposed to only seeing the finished product.

Q: What are one or two pieces of advice you might give to young groups?

Lisa Kaplan: I don't think young people necessarily understand the importance of the connections they have with their own peers. Those are the people who they will grow with and establish relationships and collaborations.

The other thing is that a lot of kids who want to be in a chamber music group don't understand that they need to prioritize committing to doing it. What they usually do is say, "I want to see if this is going to work before I commit to it." You have to commit to it and then decide after a year or whatever if it's going to work. That's what we did.

Duvall: We made big decisions early on — like all moving en masse to Cincinnati and all moving en masse to Chicago.

Kaplan: It's like a relationship. You can't just keep dating other people if you want to see if it's going to work with that one person. You have to commit.

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Eighth Blackbird at Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

■ World premiere of Sleeping Giant: "Hand Eye" at 8 p.m. Sat., Seligman Performing Arts Center, Beverly Hills.

■ Other repertoire: 7:30 p.m. Thu., Kirk in the Hills, Bloomfield Hills; 8 p.m. Fri., Kerrytown Concert House, Ann Arbor

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