

Bridging the Gap Between Classical and Popular Music

An unlikely merging of musicians

by Melissa Maki

Photo by JoAnn Jardine

Classical music concert audiences are declining and aging. The National Endowment for the Arts reported that only 8.8 percent of adults went to a classical music concert in 2012; people under age 55 were less likely to attend. The Duluth Superior Symphony Orchestra (DSSO) sees this as a critical challenge. In its mission to attract younger fans, it's exploring some unlikely collaborations.

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Dirk Meyer, the symphony's music director, and DSSO board member Erik Honkanen, approached Walt Raschick, Duluth's Homegrown Music Festival director, last year about potential partnerships. Homegrown's success is a testament to the vibrant popular music scene in Duluth and the breadth of talented local musicians. Meyer thought the festival could help the symphony reach a new audience.

Raschick was receptive. "We want all types of music to get represented," he explains. The 17th annual Homegrown lineup included 200 acts spanning multiple genres — from blues to experimental to punk. And for the first time in Homegrown history, classical music was featured with a classical music showcase and a symphony opening for bluegrass heavyweights Trampled by Turtles.

By all accounts, it was largely a successful experiment. "Incorporating classical music into Homegrown was a good first step into expanding what Homegrown can be," says Raschick.

Both musicians and audience members gave positive feedback. As a result, the DSSO is embarking on a more ambitious project to try to bridge the gap between popular and classical musicians. The DSSO Bridge Sessions project is sponsored by the Duluth Superior Area Community Foundation's Young Leaders Fund and the Jane S. Smith Memorial Fund and will offer musicians from both sides of the aisle the opportunity and incentive to collaborate with one another.

Local bands that want to collaborate with symphony players were invited to register online this spring. Now the public has the chance to vote on which bands they'd like to see participate based on band bios and YouTube videos.

Competing bands will be announced September 11. They'll each be matched with a symphony musician collaborator who plays violin, percussion, bass, or trumpet. The musicians will have two goals: 1) adapt a classical piece of music to the style of the band, and 2) incorporate the symphony player into one of the band's original pieces.

"I think the two groups will realize they share some common ground," says Heidi Lord, manager of DSSO operations and special events. "There are a lot of people in bands that read and write music and have classical training. And there are a number of people in the symphony who are great improvisers or can hold it down when it comes to playing folk, rock, or jazz music."

Their works will be performed at concerts on November 6 and 7 and judged with audience participation. The winner will receive a \$1500 commission to create a new collaborative piece with the full orchestra backing his or her band. An arranger and composer will work with the band and its symphony collaborator for this final project, and the piece will be performed at the DSSO's February 6 concert.

"The intent is for this to be a true collaboration. It's a great opportunity for the musicians to learn from one another," says Lord. —DSL

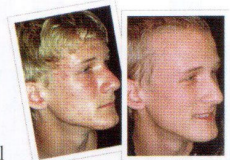


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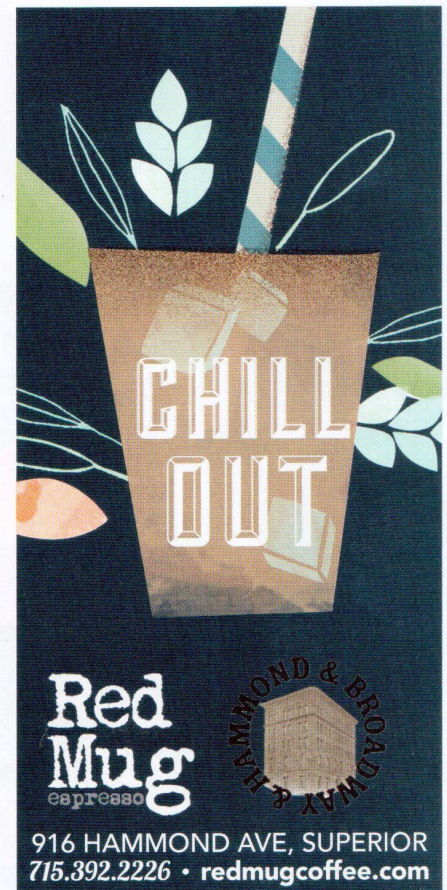
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