

Ann Arbor's most intimate venue: The Kerrytown Concert House

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Hill Auditorium, the Michigan Theater, the Blind Pig, The Ark — these are the go-to spots for live music in Ann Arbor. But what about the lesser-known venues that reside off the beaten path? The Kerrytown Concert House may not be a recognizable name to most students, but to many Ann Arbor residents and some University students and faculty, it's a staple for live music in a city with many options from which to choose.

Known for its intimate space and welcoming atmosphere, the Concert House plays host to performers in styles ranging from classical and chamber music to avant-garde jazz and cabaret.

"If you open up The New York Times any Friday where they have a listing of what's going on (in) downtown (New York) in jazz, about 80 percent of those people listed have passed through here," founder and director Deanna Relyea said.

In addition to these national — and in some cases, international — touring acts, the Concert House is used frequently by students and faculty of the University.

In the upcoming months, KCH will see a number of events with University connections. The Schumann Festival Concerts in December will include three nights of chamber music played by School of Music, Theater & Dance students and faculty members, while the musical theatre department will take over the Concert House in December to perform songs from new Broadway and off-Broadway musicals. In addition to these traditional performances, the concert house will be the site of a January master class for musical theatre students taught by Eric Comstock and Barbara Fasano

— a cabaret duo currently tearing up the New York nightlife scene.

“I think that young people could take this place over,” said Relyea, a University alum herself. “They could make it their place.”

Relyea has long embraced the natural evolution of the venue.

Her original plan back in 1984 was simple: find a studio suitable for teaching classical piano lessons and an occasional master class. A developer offered her a residential house on 4th Avenue — a 20-minute walk from the Diag near Zingerman’s Deli. After an unsuccessful attempt to have it torn down for parking, she decided to give it a try.

“The rent, when it first started, was \$1500 a month — which was a lot in those days,” Relyea said. “That kind of forced me to think about ways to make money (and) diversify the business.”

One performance led to another and the Concert House — now a non-profit organization — has continued to grow and progress ever since.

“We’ve sort of moved our niche as necessary through the years,” Relyea said.

“People look to the space for many different things,” added Ellie Falaris Ganelin, marketing assistant for the concert house. “You come in the afternoon and you’ll see kids toting their cellos or violins up the stairs to take lessons.”

But when the night falls, performers from around the world come to entertain eager audiences. In the past two months, musicians from Finland, Germany, Argentina and Spain have played sets.

In its current incarnation, the Concert House has maintained Relyea’s initial vision by renting out rooms upstairs for private lessons, but its primary attraction is its first-floor performance space.

The L-shaped room that takes over most of the first floor has a distinctly intimate feel, unlike many concert venues.

“The space is fairly small — it’s a 110 seating capacity,” Falaris Ganelin

said. “The audience is up close, so the performers can see what color lipstick you’re wearing in the front row.”



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audience and artist has affected her performances at the Concert House.

“The space is intimate and certainly enhances a sense of warmth and community,” she wrote in an e-mail interview. “As my performances frequently involved conversation with the audience, this is incredibly important.”

The relationship between audience and performer continues after the music stops.

“After the show, the artist will be sitting here in the hallway and the audience members can interact with the artist afterwards,” Falaris Ganelin said.

This sense of community is something that Falaris Ganelin considers one of the most important aspects of the Concert House.

“(It’s this) unique, organic interaction that you don’t see at other places” that makes the venue so attractive to patrons and musicians alike, she said.

The intimacy of the Concert House also lends itself well to on-the-spot improvisation.

“By being in a smaller setting, you have more of that interaction — that fire, that spark to create something new happens in a space where you can be close to the other players and to the audience,” Falaris Ganelin said, adding that this “spark” is more difficult to generate at a massive venue like Hill.

The city itself is also an important component to the Concert House’s longevity.

“The Concert House is a unique business,” Relyea said. “It’s designed to fit into Ann Arbor.”

“Ann Arbor attracts artistic and educated people,” she continued. “The reason why any local business survives is because the people in the community care to support local businesses and keep that thriving.”

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