

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

## Maestro of the Internet

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IF Mendelssohn were alive today, would he have a MySpace page? Probably, if the new board of directors of Orchestra New England had anything to do with it.

The group, which is posting advertisements on YouTube and includes a member who uses phrases like “brand loyalty” when discussing music, is having a dynamic effect on this New Haven orchestra. Concert attendance is up, the musicians are involved with a musical that may be headed to Broadway, even the orchestra’s longtime conductor, James Sinclair, is feeling reborn.



“Even though I’m going to be 60 soon, three factors are keeping me young,” Mr. Sinclair said. “One is working with these musicians. But, I have to say, too, that the board members are also giving me a lot of energy. Plus, we’re playing better than ever. As for the mood here, I have to say, you can just feel the buzz in the air.”

Much of that buzz has been generated by Bill Schaberg, a Fairfield resident and longtime booster of Orchestra New England. “When I joined the board last fall and organized what I call ‘the action team,’ ” he said, referring to the four members directly involved in promotion, “there didn’t seem to be anything really happening to advertise our orchestra. We were barely mentioning the special concerts on our calendar.

“Clearly, we needed some shaking up. So, last fall, two months before our annual Colonial Concert, I got the arts magazine in New Haven to take pictures of Jim Sinclair, our conductor, dressed in colonial garb. We also had Jim and the musicians

wear period clothes for the show. Our sales were four times the amount of other recent concerts, so we felt we were onto something.”

Mr. Schaberg said that the fresh advertising approach merely amounted to maximizing the potential and the personality that already existed at Orchestra New England, also known as ONE.

“Jim Sinclair, like most conductors, is quite an actor,” Mr. Schaberg said. “He has a habit of talking to the audience and has a lot of energy when he conducts. All we’re trying to do, with our promotion, is get the word out to younger people about how much fun classical music can be.”

Lynne McNamee, a recent addition to the action team, whose day job is in marketing, sees the group’s foray into technology as a way to grab music lovers who surf the Net. She may often sound as if she is discussing household products with rhetorical questions like “What is the unique selling point of this orchestra?” or talk of “product loyalty.” But she is also using her knowledge of the marketplace to get people to come and hear the music she loves.

“When I joined the board last year, I asked myself, ‘What do we need to do to get more people to hear this great music?’ ” Ms. McNamee said. “All sorts of rock groups post videos on YouTube, and I thought we should use it, too, for our BaroqueFest concert, of this past February. So, we made two short, funny ads and put them up.”

One of those advertisements featured jazz music playing in the background and the words “If it ain’t Baroque ... don’t fix it,” as well as the location and date of the show. As a result, attendance at the concert was strong.

“We think we have some of the top players in the country, plus a conductor with incredible energy who pulls them all together,” Ms. McNamee said. “If using cheesy jokes interests people in seeing them, I’m thrilled. They deserve it. For me, helping to get the word out about our orchestra is easier than being annoyed that not enough people are attending the shows.”

Ms. McNamee is particularly excited about two coming events that should benefit from the action team’s public relations.

“On April 28, the orchestra is going to be performing Mendelssohn’s ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream,’ with actors doing scenes from [Shakespeare](#)’s play,” she said. “In fact, since there’s a wedding in it, the tickets for that night will resemble invitations. It

should be a special night, seeing that it's both our 700th performance and is close to Jim Sinclair's 60th birthday.

"Many of our musicians are also involved in an original musical, 'Grishka,' about the life of Rasputin, that will have its debut here next year and is on the fast track to Broadway. The synergy between the events, the musicians and our board is more intense than ever."

Junius Johnson, executive director of Orchestra New England, said this newly found synergy was more than fortuitous. He said it was vital to the orchestra's survival.

"For a midsize group such as ours, ticket sales don't come close to covering our operating expenses," Mr. Johnson said. "So, I'm particularly pleased with all the recent activity. For instance, we're partnering up with the Elm Shakespeare Company for 'Midsummer's Night.' The more we form alliances with such arts organizations, the better chance we have of flourishing. Plus, when the shows are successful, that should help us attract corporate sponsorship. That's why people like Lynne and Bill are so important. They're bringing in those sorts of fresh ideas."

Mark Kuss, the composer for "Grishka," said he thinks he may be the luckiest recipient of all the energy that is coming from the players and the board these days. "The support that I've gotten from the musicians for my show has been extraordinary," he said. "Many of the orchestra's musicians have played on the 'Grishka' demo for free."

Mr. Sinclair, who founded Orchestra New England in 1974, sees no dichotomy in using the newest technology to let the world know about centuries-old music.

"It seems important to me that the arts come to terms with the Internet," he said. "YouTube and MySpace are both fantastic ways to let people know about music they might otherwise take for granted."

*"A Midsummer Night's Dream" at Battell Chapel (corner of College and Elm Streets), New Haven; April 28 at 8 p.m. (preconcert performance, 7:40 p.m.). Tickets: (203) 562-5666, (888) 736-2663 or [www.shubert.com](http://www.shubert.com).*