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World-class musicians play pocket-sized concerts

If you live in France the perfect notes soaring out of the village hall may not be produced by your local amateur musicians.
By Christina Mackenzie / Published: 11:32AM GMT 17 Nov 2009

They may be the sound of world-famous musicians performing in unlikely venues for an audience new to classical music but drawn by low ticket prices for concerts taking place in venues close to their homes.

Musicians such as Felicity Lott, the soprano, the cellist Henri Demarquette and violinist Augustin Dumay regularly squeeze one of these "pocket-sized concerts" into their busy schedules for a small fee, said Gisele Magnan, a former concert pianist who five years ago founded *Les Concerts de Poche* - literally, pocket concerts.

The musicians, she said, "realise that the audience for classical music needs to be rejuvenated and they really enjoy the warm yet concentrated atmosphere in these small places".

Speaking at her home in this small rural village south of Paris, which is also the office for the eight employees of *Les Concerts de Poche*, Magnan said that as a concert pianist she had played in major venues across the world "but the audience was always the same - people of a certain age prepared to pay quite a lot of money to listen to music they're generally familiar with.

"In addition, the programmes were often long and complicated and, like most classical musicians, I felt at great distance from the audience."

Tired of the demands made by her agent and record companies and aspiring to do something else as she approached mid-life, she decided to try to bring classical music to a younger audience more used to rap than Bach.

With the help of city authorities in Fontainebleau, a small city south of Paris which is home to the eponymous palace and forest, she organised a series of concerts for youngsters in 2004.

To ensure their cooperation and enthusiasm she set up workshops beforehand at which the students could sing and participate.

The concerts turned out to be a huge success and authorities of neighbouring cities asked her to organise similar events. So the idea slowly took off, "though I never imagined it would develop so far, so fast," she said.

The concerts have spread from a large radius around Fontainebleau to northern France - at the request of French Socialist party leader Martine Aubry who attends them regularly - and east around the champagne capital, Reims.

The premise is that during the week or two preceding the event, free music workshops are organised in local schools or charities, "so people come to these concerts who would never have come otherwise," said Magnan.

Tickets cost from five to nine euros (£4.40 to £7.98), or are free for people "in real economic difficulty".

At one recent concert a group of teenage youths did not mind letting others know they were enjoying their first classical concert.

"Hey, man, I really dig this," one kept repeating as his friends tried to shush him.

Yet the concerts are rarely listened to in rapt silence and stiff collars. There are always children shuffling and whispering, there is usually somebody who starts to clap and then stops suddenly realising it wasn't the end.

But nobody minds and no one leaves too quickly at the end.

The musicians, who perform for a fee of about 2,000 euros - "a fraction of what they get paid by major concert halls" - know that part of the deal is to stay after the performance and chat with the audience.

"I never usually have the opportunity to talk with the people I've just sung for," Lott said after a recent concert at which she sang some Mozart, Rossini, Debussy and Britten. Pianist Brigitte Engerer said after another that "I love playing in such proximity to my audience".

Musicians are given great freedom in the choice of programme. "All I ask is that it be varied and last no longer than an hour," said Magnan.

And varied they usually are, often including composers from contrasting periods and styles. Upcoming concerts later this month include two of folk music from central Europe, one of contemporary composers Eric Satie and Francis Poulenc, and another a piano recital with music from Faure, Schubert and Liszt.

From seven concerts in 2005, *Les Concerts de Poche* this year organised 52 and in 2010 will add the opera *Carmen* - a one-off event that will cost 300,000 euros to stage.

Ordinary concerts cost 12,000 euros but ticket sales, she said, bring in only 1,000 euros, the remainder covered by sponsors or subsidised by local and regional government.

Like many working at grassroots level, however, she worries that French governmental plans to end local tax levies on businesses will affect the organisation.

"Income from this tax is what enables local government to subsidise cultural activities. My association employs eight people who will all be out of a job if the subsidies end," Magnan said.

"And then everybody would be out of pocket."