

Three-way Discussion: Bach and Beer with Steuart Pincombe at BottleHouse Brewery (July 15)



Photo: Mathias Reed Visuals

by Mike Telin, Daniel Hautzinger & Daniel Hathaway

On Tuesday, July 15, we went to the BottleHouse Brewery in Cleveland Heights to hear Steuart Pincombe's program "Bach and Beer," which presented outstanding performances of Bach's first three cello suites in the welcoming atmosphere of a neighborhood tavern. The experience inspired a conversation between Mike Telin, Daniel Hautzinger and Daniel Hathaway, both about the evening and the increasingly popular movement of performing classical music in alternative venues, especially neighborhood gathering places.

Mike Telin: "For the BottleHouse Brewery's first time hosting this type of event, I think the space worked pretty well. The stage area was great and I loved the way they set up chairs around it, so that if you did want to have more of a traditional concert experience you could. You were able to come when you wanted and leave when you needed to without interrupting things. But they did need to be faster at the bar."

Daniel Hautzinger: “The nice thing with the space was that pretty much no matter where you were, you could see the stage and hear the music.”

Telin: “The space also worked well, I think, in making the non-concert patrons feel welcome. They got their beer, they got their food, and they were able to go outside and enjoy the evening. The restaurant was able to still operate.”



Photo: BottleHouse Brewery

Daniel Hathaway: “How about the admission policy of paying what you want?”

Hautzinger: “That allows someone who doesn’t want to hear the concert and just wants to eat or have a beer to do so without having to pay for the concert. But I think most people who were there for the concert ended up supporting it. And the admission policy makes it more friendly.

“The one thing that would have helped would have been a microphone to help Steuart get the audience’s attention when he wanted to begin and for when he was talking.”

Telin: “It will be interesting to go back there, because I think the venue has all the makings of success.

“Regarding Steaurt’s talks, I think he has an engaging way and comes off nicely. Maybe he went on a bit too long at times. As it develops, he’ll get better at it. I did really like that he had someone from BottleHouse Brewery talk about the beer.”

Hathaway: “I thought the music history part was a little too in-depth for this occasion. Instead, I wish he had spent thirty seconds describing what a Bach suite is. I think that might have brought a little bit of enlightenment.”

Hautzinger: “I like the talking. I think the danger is that it can very easily feel long. But in this atmosphere it’s a good thing, because it does make things more friendly and less formal. And it gives you something to talk to the musician about afterwards if they’re around. Not using notes would be nice, so that Stuart could engage directly with the audience. He has a great sense of humor, which helps.”

Hathaway: “I thought Stuart’s playing was superb. And he certainly didn’t play differently than he would have played in a concert hall.”



Telin: “I agree that the performances were extraordinary. Especially the C major suite.”

Hautzinger: “The first and last movements, especially the last, of that suite, had this wonderful lightness. I loved the performance. I felt like all of the suites were very personal in the freedom he takes with them so that they felt organic.”

Telin: “I felt like he relaxed as the evening continued. The performance evolved over the three suites.”

Hathaway: “It did. I felt nervous during the first one. I don’t know what I was nervous about, but Stuart did relax, because he relaxed me.”

Hautzinger: “Something that impressed me was that his attention never flagged, despite the occasional dropped glass or extraneous noise, which wasn’t distracting, but could be to a performer.”

Telin: “He’s a fabulous player. It’d be nice to have him back with this kind of program. I loved it. I was nervous at the beginning too, I think because I wanted it to work. I really like hearing music in this kind of situation. I think it’s the best way to engage audiences.”



Hathaway: “I think presenting concerts in alternative spaces, especially bars, is a great idea. It replicates what happened before concert halls opened, like in Zimmermann’s coffee house in Leipzig. Leipzig had the first concert hall, but before that, when there weren’t concert halls, concerts were in bars and cafes. Presenting concerts in these venues requires some special treatment, but I love the idea of putting music where people naturally gather, in a space that’s relaxed and conducive to socializing as well as listening to music.”

Hautzinger: “It allows an easier and much more congenial connection between the musicians and the audience, so it’s easy for them to converse with one another. That is a great way to involve people in the music, and if they’re more involved, they’ll hopefully enjoy it more.”

Telin: “I think the movement is wonderful. It certainly isn’t new, as Dan pointed out. I know arts organizations have been trying this kind of thing for a very long time. I think now musicians are understanding a little more about how to approach the audience.

“It presents a great opportunity for bringing certain types of music to the public in a relaxed situation, without having to dumb it down. That’s what is really impressive. And

for most of the music being performed in these places, you don't need a huge concert hall. What makes it enjoyable, as both of you have stated, is that up-close-and-personal feeling. I think that both musicians and venues are serious about making this happen.



Ensemble HD at the Happy Dog. Photo: Ensemble HD

“These situations have given me new ears for a lot of music. For example, I never thought I would become a lover of period instrument ensembles. But, from the first concert I heard by Les Délices at the Busta Gallery, I completely changed my mind. I love the music now. I hear the performances in a more honest way than I ever had before. What is fun is that performers can pick and choose movements to play, as Ensemble HD often does at the Happy Dog. We’ve gotten too far into this ‘everything needs to be done in its entirety’ all the time. Any music can work in these venues, but the musicians have to think about it.”

Hautzinger: “I think another type of music that works well for something like this is contemporary music, especially works written with amplification. Then you don’t have to worry about getting everyone to pay attention and being really quiet so you can hear. The amplification also ties into what you might normally hear in a bar. Since the audiences in a bar are probably more used to hearing amplified things, it might help draw them in more. It makes it less foreign.”

Hathaway: “The more experimentation with what is presented in these venues, the better.”

Telin: “I think things are the most successful where you’ve had bar owners and managers who are committed to presenting live music. I would like to think that we could get to a

point where businesses wouldn't have to change too much, because it would become such a big part of what they do. An example is Sean Watterson at the Happy Dog."

Hathaway: "But Sean's setup is much more conducive to carrying on the normal business of the bar and restaurant than other venues."

Hautzinger: "You want a setup where it's possible to still order a drink or order food without interrupting the concert or disturbing your neighbor."

Telin: "You want an atmosphere that's respectful to the artist and the people who do want to listen, while making it OK for the people wandering in and finding a live performance."

Hathaway: "I think it's important for it to not be too self-conscious, because people should be able to just happen across a concert and become engaged."

Telin: "Some things don't work. For instance, I was at a couple of events where the musicians have been too close to the door. You want to provide a space for the musicians that works, but there were evenings where people came in and they weren't even sure if they were allowed to come in the door because they were walking within two feet of a performance."

Hathaway: "I have certain expectations going into these types of concerts. I want to be able to hear the music, I want to be able to buy a drink and order some food without feeling self-conscious about ordering, paying, eating, or renewing my glass. I want to feel comfortable and relaxed, and I want it to be a good experience."

Telin: "The duration matters as well. I think that both Debra Nagy of Les Délices and Tom Welsh at Transformer Station have hit the nail on the head. One hour straight through followed by nibbles, conversation, and of course, wine."

Hathaway: "When you get into a situation that doesn't have a clear beginning and ending, one of my expectations is to be able to leave graciously whenever I need to or arrive late."

Hautzinger: "In terms of being comfortable, I think it's possible with these kinds of things for them to feel clubby, and I want it to feel welcoming. It could be intimidating in a different way from a traditional classical concert, because you could feel like everyone already knows each other because they've been coming to these, they're used to this space, they've had the post-concert conversations."

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