Classical Notes: PS21 reinvents itself while reinventing itself

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In Columbia County last summer, PS 21 took a giant step forward in presenting performing arts and film with the opening of an $11 million theater featuring the latest in sound and light technologies and open air seating for 300. The new venue was a huge achievement for the Chatham-based organization, showing it can live up to its full name, Performance Spaces for the 21st Century. For the previous 20 years of summer programs, events happened inside a big tent.

With social distancing and other safety measures in place, PS 21 is proudly returning with an abbreviated and reconfigured lineup of events. The schedule, running through Sept. 15, features film screenings and short classical music programs, plus a celebration of the recently completed walking paths that link PS 21’s 100 acres of grounds to existing trails leading to the village of Chatham.

PS 21’s new theater, completed in fall 2018, includes offices, a rehearsal studio and a flexible stage that can become a self-contained, year-round performance space. The building was a dream come true for founder Judith Grunberg, the tireless community activist of Chatham. Sadly, Grunberg died at age 87 in September 2019, just weeks after the close of PS 21’s debut summer in its new home.

One of Grunberg’s last decisions was to hire Elena Siyanko as the organization’s first executive director. Siyanko began in the position in June of last year. Her long resume in arts management includes fundraising at Bard College’s Fisher Center, programming and audience development for the Clark Art Institute, and serving as executive director of the Monadnock Music Festival in New Hampshire. Just months after her arrival in Chatham, the pandemic struck.
Hampshire. Just months after her arrival in Chatham, the parameters and weight of her new job suddenly grew upon the death of Grunberg, who was not only PS 21’s founder but also its principal donor. Nevertheless, Siyanko put together a rich array of happenings for a 2020 season that was scheduled to launch in March. Then came COVID-19.

“It’s been one earthquake after another,” says Siyanko. Shifting metaphors, she later remarks, “There’s been no chance to spread our wings.”

Having a great building is one thing but having the administrative and financial oomph to keep it going is another matter entirely. Siyanko said that the priority for PS 21 is to tend to matters that are usually addressed before constructing or opening a new venue, things like building an expanded board and a sustainable base of funders. “The cost of running a year-round venue are exponentially higher than a summer,” she says, while adding a positive note that the new building carries no debt.

“Judy’s vision was incredible,” continues Siyanko. “She left us a beautiful theater in the middle of 100 acres that are now preserved. One of her goals was that audiences experience the landscape in new ways.”

Recently, PS 21 received its first grant from the NEA, a subsidy of $25,000 under the endowment’s Our Town program, which is dedicated to “creative placemaking” in the form of projects that bring arts groups and local governments into partnership in order to sustain cultural life and strengthen communities. Working with the village of Chatham and the Columbia Land Conservancy, PS 21 is presenting a series of events titled Pathways: Blazing Trails to a Sustainable Future that runs Aug. 2-8. There will be talks on ecology and climate change and several guided walks on the recently completed trails, including one under the full moon of Monday, Aug. 3.

The high point of the Pathways series and the entire season at PS 21 is the local debut of Alarm Will Sound, a chamber orchestra dedicated to contemporary music. Carrying forward the theme of nature, the group will perform “Ten Thousand Birds,” a 2014 piece based on bird calls and written by composer John Luther Adams Alarm Will Sound presents the piece on three different occasions.
Lutner Adams. Alarm Will Sound presents the piece on three different occasions. First up on Thursday evening Aug. 6, there will be an outdoor performance with 19 musicians sprinkled around the landscape and audiences strolling while listening. The next day, there’s a 4 p.m. concert in the theater, and a fundraising gala follows that evening.

Adams, the composer, was a resident of northern Alaska for 40 years and now lives in desert locales of North and South America. He bases all of his works in the realm of the natural world and won the Pulitzer Prize in 2014 for an hourlong orchestral piece titled “Become Ocean.” He composed “Ten Thousand Birds” specifically for Alarm Will Sound and its founder and conductor, Alan Pierson. “The score is a series of bird songs, so there’s no score in a traditional sense,” explains Pierson, who was rather mystified upon first receiving the stack of 27 distinct “songs.” The idea is that the songs are distributed among the players, though some of them are actually duets or trios. The performers then come up with their own sequence and layering of the material, which includes other nature sounds.

To add some structure to the piece, Pierson took a suggestion from Adams and shaped it around the flow of a day -- morning, midday, afternoon, evening and back to morning. There are no breaks between what might be considered movements. The piece lasts about 16 minutes and begins and ends with the sound of frogs. But it’s not like the frogs lay down a beat, since there is no unifying pulse to the work.

“Everybody has a timer, and they know when they have to be to play each song. While all that is planned out carefully, there is still some openness, and sometimes multiple bird songs are simultaneous,” says Pierson. “Like birds, the players are aware of dialogue, but kind of in their own time and the pacing is often determined with breath.”

When Pierson and his 20-member group arrive in Chatham, it will be their first time together since the shutdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. They’ll be in residence at PS 21 for about a week, working on other contemporary scores and preparing for upcoming concerts and recordings.
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Early in the quarantine, Pierson made another version of “Ten Thousand Birds” that brought together his ensemble in a unique fashion. He asked each player to record a video of their performance and send it to him. He then transferred the videos to sundry laptops, cellphones, tablets, and other devices, new and old, with one player per screen. Next, Pierson distributed the gadgets around his New York City apartment, placing them on furniture, windowsills and door frames. Once he got everything in position and on “play,” he walks around the space with a video camera. The five-minute film can be viewed on the Alarm Will Sound channel on YouTube.

“It’s a reduction, a Cliff Notes version of the piece,” explains Pierson. “I used a sequencer with 40 tracks with everyone’s recording in the right order. I then put them in concert, a dialogue,”

It’s a simple and clever idea that’s fascinating to watch. But with so many disparate devices to synch up, it must have been a nightmare to realize. Pierson said that’s just what his boyfriend said.

“He’s a software designer, he’s very very smart and realized it would be extremely complicated and thought he’d never see me for the next month,” says Pierson. “But it became a collaboration for us. It took over our house and our lives.”

Joseph Dalton is a freelance writer based in Troy.
The Pathways series of concerts, walks and talks runs Aug. 3-9. Other events coming up at PS21 include a film series and a modern music festival. View the full schedule at: ps21chatham.org