

THE SOUND OF MONEY

September 9, 2015

9:30 a.m.

Can This Start-up With Cellos Shake Up Classical Music's Business-As-Usual?

By Justin Davidson



Standing, from left: Miranda Cuckson, Helga Davis, Andy Akiho, Paola Prestini, Rinde Eckert, Jeffrey Zeigler, Anthony Roth Costanzo. On floor: Imogene Strauss, Reggie Gray, Magos Herrera. Photo: Bobby Doherty/New York Magazine

On a perfect summer night in 2012, the keening of a clarinet ricocheted off the century-old walls of a roofless sawdust factory and plumed out into the streets of Williamsburg. It

was the first audible intimation of an unlikely dream: a tiny high-tech clubhouse where composers, musical adventurers, and classical-music performers could make as much noise as they wanted 24 hours a day. Three years, \$16 million, and untold sleepless nights later, that brick shell enfolds a new hall and a new organization: National Sawdust. It's the sort of place that makes a new-music aficionado want to bring a sleeping bag and move in for a few weeks.

There's nothing else quite like it in New York. Establishment venues like Zankel Hall have welcomed composers, the 28-year-old organization Bang on a Can has colonized virtually every concert space in the city, and (Le) Poisson Rouge has found a winning combination of eclectic programming, casual atmosphere, and poor acoustics. But new music has never had its own miniature Carnegie Hall, a space explicitly designed for musical experimentation.

Google the phrase "classical music is ..." and you get a neurotic series of choices: "... dying," "... the best," and "... dead." Options 1 and 3 are demonstrably false, but even so, plenty of music lovers feel the same mixed response, whipsawing between affection and pessimism. They don't all have the energy of Kevin Dolan, a 63-year-old amateur organist, aspiring composer, and tax lawyer living in Washington, D.C. He could have simply written annual checks to the Kennedy Center and hoped the business would take care of itself. Instead, he says, he realized that young musicians "needed a place to record and rehearse — a platform where they could help develop a broader, younger audience."

At first, thinking he could simply convert a townhouse he owned in Brooklyn, Dolan started hunting for architects who were young enough to be both adventurous and cheap. He

settled on Peter Zuspan, Laura Trevino, and Stella Lee of Bureau V. It quickly became clear that Dolan's fantasy would not fit within his property or his budget. "He had three requirements," Zuspan says. "The space had to be acoustically strong. Audiences shouldn't have to subject themselves to discomfort. And there would be good food."

Zuspan started biking around Williamsburg, looking for a commercial-size lot, at least 40-by-100 feet, close to a subway station. Once he located the empty sawdust factory, the architects figured out how to insert an acoustically insulated, visually exciting womb while leaving room for a small restaurant. "Kevin said we have to do this well or not at all," Zuspan recalls, marveling at the amount of responsibility that Dolan entrusted to newbie designers. "He wanted us to get involved in honing the mission for the nonprofit, in fund-raising, and in coming up with the identity of the place. He only wanted people who were under 40 to vote on all decisions." Some of the money, almost inevitably, was raised through a Kickstarter campaign; the rest, through conventional donations and patronage.

Building a hall is one thing; creating an institution is another, and for that Dolan turned to the young composer Paola Prestini, who had already developed a reputation as a formidable impresario even before she graduated from Juilliard. Rather than wait around for an opera company to call with a commission, she co-founded the production collaborative VisionIntoArt, which presents other composers' work as well as her own. "I see it as a responsibility of every composer and musician to create dialogue between arts and opportunities for their peers," she says. That reciprocity paid off: By the time she started booking National Sawdust, she had built up large stores of gratitude in the new-music world.

Prestini also turned out to be a networking virtuoso. She got a handful of governments to cover their artists' travel expenses. She brokered partnerships with other organizations, like the Choir of Trinity Wall Street, the mini-opera festival Prototype, and a clutch of music ensembles. She roped in generous elders (Terry Riley, Philip Glass) and her own cohort (David T. Little, Nico Muhly) to help with programming. Even before the plumbing was in, the New York Philharmonic decided to move its roving Contact! series to National Sawdust, starting what the orchestra's artistic planner Ed Yim describes as "emotionally and strategically a long-term commitment."

There is some irony to opening a scrappy new-music venue in a neighborhood where most musicians can no longer afford to live. Williamsburg provides a steady stream of tourists, ticket-buyers with cultural curiosity and disposable income, and the kind of cred that the Philharmonic craves. But it's clear that Prestini is hoping to establish an organization with a long, even global reach. Part of its power will lie in the volume of programming: After an opening frenzy, it'll host two sets a night, every Wednesday through Sunday — more than 500 shows in the first year. (The place will be closed but not quiet on Mondays and Tuesdays, when musicians can rehearse and record.)

Prestini is determined that National Sawdust not be merely a showcase for her predilections. She's lined up 27 "curators" with carte blanche to program whatever they can. So, for example, the season opens with a mini-festival devoted to Schubert's *Winterreise*, including a multilingual rewrite by the jazz pianist Uri Caine and the vocalist Theo Bleckmann. For now, Prestini is leaning heavily on her friends — one curator is her husband, the former Kronos Quartet cellist Jeffrey Zeigler — but that will change as National Sawdust

acquires its own identity.

The organization's range mirrors Prestini's experience. Born in Trento, Italy, she moved with her family to Nogales, Arizona; her father opened a woodwind factory just across the border in Mexico. After her parents split, she and her mother spent summers in Italy, leaving Prestini with a sense of half-belonging in several different worlds. "I didn't find my Italy until I traveled to the south," she says. "I did field recordings in a foster-care home in Lecce and asked the kids to sing a song from their childhood, which I used in a piece called *Body Maps*."

For Prestini, organizing sounds and organizing people have never been entirely separate activities. "I see it as a really fluid interaction. The creativity of composing informs the creativity of running an organization." She sets aside Mondays and Tuesdays, plus a few hours on weekends, for composing, and gives the rest of the week to National Sawdust. Until their offices are ready, she and her tiny staff have been working in a café down the street, sustained on caffeine, free Wi-Fi, and start-up adrenaline.

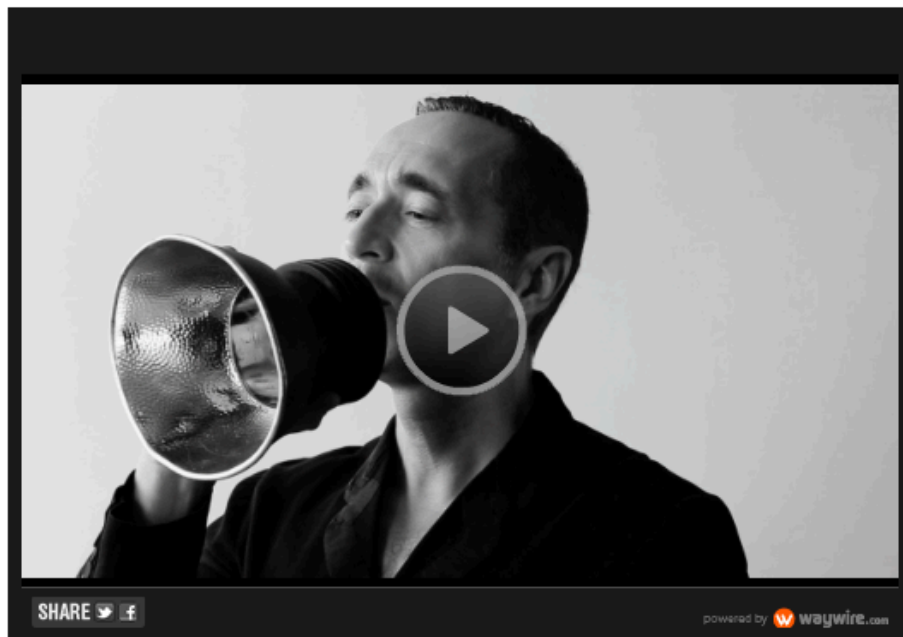
"Raising money doesn't scare me," Prestini says. "Still ... I didn't understand the magnitude." Even Dolan was caught by surprise by the amount of energy National Sawdust continues to suck up. "It was going to be my post-retirement project," he says, chuckling. As his vision has enlarged, he's had to keep working to keep the money spigots open. Determined to keep ticket prices around \$25, Prestini and her team spent the summer frantically raising the last of the \$2.5 million in operating expenses that they needed.

As performing-arts start-ups go, this one has a spectacular collection of advantages. Dolan has significantly upped the

institution's chances by ensuring that it won't need to pay rent for five years, and possibly not ever. In a scheme that only a tax lawyer could have thought up, he persuaded patrons to buy shares in the building. Five years from now, when its value has (almost assuredly) risen, his gang of philanthropists can donate the venue to the nonprofit that runs it — and write off more than they invested. Everybody wins.

“I never wanted it to be just my baby,” Dolan says. “The whole idea was to create an institution that has a life of its own and that will be around 100 years from now.”

Below: An exclusive video from National Sawdust, directed by Brigitte Lacombe and featuring Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, and more talking about how they listen to music.



**This article appears in the September 7, 2015 issue of New York Magazine.*

DILLON