

Frantasia:

By Jaime McLeod, Consolidated Writers



One of the things that sets Mainer—whether native-born or “from away”—apart is our collective willingness to take risks. Sometimes that drive takes the form of dangerous jobs or hobbies (I often mention to my partner — a native Mainer — that I’ve met more people missing at least one finger during my three years in Maine than in my whole life prior to moving here). More often, though, it manifests in a need to call one’s own shots, to follow one’s own “bliss.” Call it the entrepreneurial spirit, the punk DIY ethic, or rugged individualism, but Maine is awash in people setting out to do their own thing in their own way. It’s exactly that spirit that led the sleepy, former mill town of Livermore Falls, a town that’s almost Rockwellian in its normalcy, to become home to one of the most cutting edge music festivals in the state, and possibly even the country.

Fran Szostek, organizer of the annual Frantasia Festival of Out Music and Arts, is definitely a guy who makes his own rules. From the trademark Middle Eastern-style skullcaps he often wears to his eclectic taste in music, Szostek prides himself of being a bit on the unconventional side. A realtor by profession, Szostek admits he doesn’t really have a head for finance, and leaves the specifics of running their business to his wife, Kathleen. And though he is a musical connoisseur and amateur musician, Szostek says he lacks any real talent in that department, too. Where Szostek really shines is as a catalyst, bringing talented people together in ways that foster creativity and mutual inspiration.

For five years running, that has been Szostek’s mission for Frantasia, which is good, because he certainly doesn’t make any money organizing and promoting the annual experimental music festival. “We’re not nonprofit. We’re less than nonprofit,” quips Szostek, who puts out a few thousand dollars of his own money every year to rent the necessary sound equipment for the three-day event.

Bringing “Out There” Up Here

None of the artists, who come from New York, Europe, Mexico and similarly far-flung locations to be a part of Frantasia, get paid for performing. Instead, the festival serves as a kind of trade convention for musicians working at the fringes of their chosen genres. In addition to playing with and for each other over the course of three evenings at the Treat Memorial Library, performers spend a week living together in community at Szostek’s home, nearby.

Though the crowds are never large — the library auditorium can only hold a few dozen people at a time — Frantasia’s reputation has rippled outward, so that many prominent musicians have begun asking regulars about “that festival up in Maine.” Szostek routinely gets more inquiries from would-be performers than he can actually accommodate during the festival’s three-day schedule.

Once the people and venue are brought together, there’s no predicting what will happen during the festival itself.

“I ask people to come as they are, and magic usually happens,” he says. “I live to be surprised. Once the festival gets in full-swing, I never know what I’m going to hear next.”

No one can really define what qualifies as “out music,” which, to Szostek, is part of the beauty of it.

“I’m interested in promoting anything that falls outside of the perceived boundaries of a particular genre. This stuff wouldn’t be appreciated by people who are purists of one style of music,” Szostek says.

Music played during Frantasia could simply blur the lines between genres, such as classical and jazz, or they could be more radical. One previous Frantasia performer did whole sets where they simply made noises with their mouths — Szostek describes it as “the kind of noises your parents would yell at you for making when you were a kid. ‘Cut that out!’” Another used a cello to make sounds that mimicked television or radio static.



“A lot of people don’t get that sort of thing. They think, ‘Oh, the cello is such a beautiful instrument. Why would you use it to make those kinds of sounds?’” says Szostek.

“But if you drop your preconceived ideas about what a cello is supposed to sound like, or what music is, it’s actually quite beautiful.”

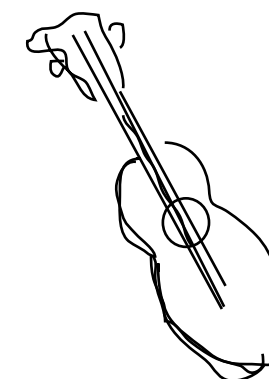


Perhaps one of the most famous exemplars of “out music” is John Cage, the American avant garde composer, probably best known for 4’33”. The controversial piece consists of a pianist sitting at a piano for four minutes and 33 seconds without playing a single note. The piece is widely believed to be a commentary on the nonexistence of true silence, encouraging listeners to pay attention to the music produced by the endless collection of spontaneously produced,

and routinely ignored, sounds all around us. Reaction to that kind of experimentation, much like the music itself, can be unpredictable. In the beginning, Cage’s audiences were routinely disdainful, or even outraged, feeling as though they’d been the butt of some elaborate prank. Likewise, some Frantasia attendees have been unsure of how to take the festival’s varied offerings.

“In the beginning, you could tell people thought this was crazy. Some people still do,” admits Szostek.

“You have to be prepared for anything. I’ve had people come in, and turn around and walk right back out. I’ve seen other people come in without having any idea of what the hell was going on, but love every minute of it.”



Frantasia Festival of Out Music and Art
When: Aug. 21, 22 and 23, 2008, 7-11 p.m.
Where: Treat Memorial Library Auditorium, 56 Main St., Livermore Falls

Tickets: \$9 for three days, or \$7 per night.
For more information or advance tickets, call 207-897-6158 or e-mail jazzcorridor@hotmail.com.

Opposite page, clockwise: past performers Audrey Chen, Greg Murphy, Fran Szostek, and Chris Cathode.

This page: Shea Mowat and Edward Snyder.

Thanks to Fran Szostek for the photographs.