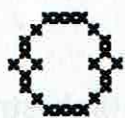




# DOMESTIC HARMONY

A start-up website that's restoring chamber music to its salon roots is taking American cities by storm. *Brian Wise* looks at the extraordinary success of the community-spirited Groupmuse



On a Saturday night, a curious sonic mash-up drifts from a terraced house in Brooklyn. There's the standard hubbub

of clinking beer bottles and boisterous hipster chatter, but it soon gives way to the most improbable of sounds: Brahms's String Quartet No. 1, performed by an ensemble decked out in faded jeans and polo shirts.

The event is organised by Groupmuse, an online service that facilitates house parties featuring chamber music performances. After the first movement, the guests, nearly all in their twenties and scattered around the living room, clap, cheer and whoop, unbothered by any sort of recital protocol. One young woman even records the performance on her phone. 'I like the enthusiasm and energy of having people right at your feet,' says Katherine Lim, a violinist in the Nova Quartet, an ensemble from the Juilliard School, who raise around \$225 in audience donations after a bowl is passed around.

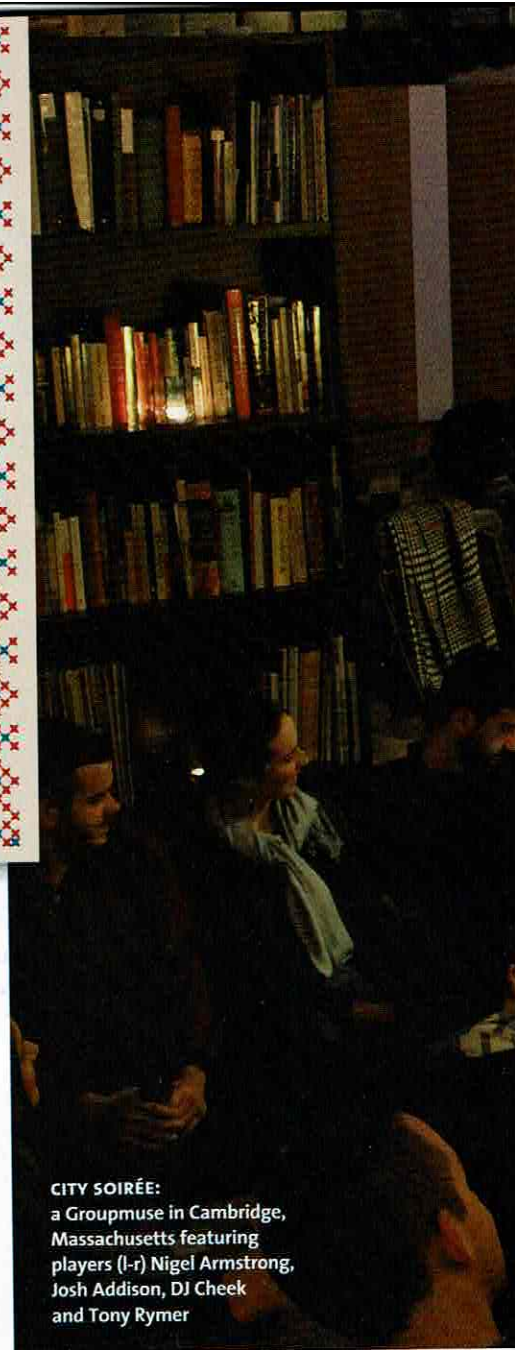
Users sign up to host or attend free Groupmuses, as the parties are called, on the organisation's website. Anyone can take part, although there are a limited number of

guest slots and the host can filter out anyone they feel might be unsafe. According to the founders, more than 20,000 people have been to Groupmuse events since the service was launched in 2013. Most are millennials.

Groupmuse is one of a growing number of 'sharing economy' start-ups (like Uber and Airbnb) that allow users to monetise their goods and services via websites and mobile

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apps. It arrives as more orchestras and opera companies have sought to stem the greying of their audiences by hosting events in nightclubs, bars and other spaces where youth can be found... But as with many peer-to-peer businesses, Groupmuse has drawn some scrutiny for its practices involving worker pay, overtime rules and other regulations. And some observers question whether the



**CITY SOIRÉE:**  
a Groupmuse in Cambridge, Massachusetts featuring players (l-r) Nigel Armstrong, Josh Addison, DJ Cheek and Tony Rymer

company can sustain its aggressive growth plans without more revenue sources.

Sam Bodkin, a graduate of Columbia University's political science programme, came up with the idea for Groupmuse after attending informal house gatherings of New England Conservatory students. 'Each Groupmuse is so different because they represent their own members instead of an old institution that has its own way of doing things,' he says. 'We tell [hosts], "invite all your friends and encourage them to host." That's how we ensure that we're always expanding our social circles. We especially like people who don't know classical music, who are not performers and just want to spread this experience far and wide.'

The 26-year-old Bodkin organised the first Groupmuse in Boston – with its large



number of educated young people – before expanding to New York in 2014, followed by fledgling branches in San Francisco, Seattle and Washington, DC. Next is Chicago and eventually European capitals including London and Berlin. In late 2015, the company raised \$140,000 in a Kickstarter campaign to cover expansion and administrative costs (funding to date has come from a handful of private donors; Bodkin says he and his four-strong team have not drawn salaries).

Despite its youthful sensibility and social media platform, Groupmuse has a certain retro appeal. It evokes an age, predominantly during the 19th and early 20th centuries, when chamber music was played at home with invited guests, before the need to sell tickets turned everything on its head. Arun Sundararajan, a New York University business

professor who studies the sharing economy, believes Groupmuse taps a desire to return to these older times.

'People crave experiences that were common in the past but have been marginalised by the way the economy has evolved in the last 200 years,' says Sundararajan. People now want to go back to a more connected, more community-like form of consumption, even if it's not always efficient. 'I'm struck that here's a marketplace that's creating the experience of music that used to be more common in the past, before it became marginalised as we went deeper and deeper into our industrial economy.'

Groupmuse events run a wide gamut and aren't always high on glitz. In one stretch this past autumn I heard a pianist play Chopin for a dozen guests squished into his Harlem

bedroom; a string quartet host its own Groupmuse in an Upper West Side tenement with views of brick walls; and a (ticketed) 'Rite of Spring Dance Party' at Brooklyn Masonic Temple, which drew several hundred rowdy revellers for a nightclub-style performance of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. (Other so-called 'Massive Muses' have taken place in settings like a Long Island vineyard and a Brooklyn cemetery.)

'Today's world is all about direct sharing,' says Javor Bračić, the Harlem-based Chopin pianist who was, it turns out, hosting his first house concert. 'The trend is to get rid of the middlemen and offer a virtual platform for users to connect. I've played at the big stages, and I've had quite a share of recognition, so the glamorous world of classical music is available to me. I've just never found it to be ▶

that appealing. Groupmuse offers exactly the kind of direct contact with the audience that I've been dreaming of.'

Not all musicians hold an idealistic view of the organisation. 'One of the biggest things I've heard students talk about is that they don't have a guaranteed pay,' says Rachel Roberts, the director of New England Conservatory's Entrepreneurial Musicianship department. 'I've heard students talk about what that means for the sustainability of the

organisation, because musicians are highly trained professionals,' Roberts adds, however, that 'it does put the creative control in the hands of the performers who choose to partner with hosts.'

Other 'gig economy' services do involve guarantees of pay, though their impact remains to be seen. A Silicon Valley start-up called Hellostage.com, founded by former Vienna Konzerthaus chief executive Bernhard Kerres, aims to be an online marketplace for musicians, promoters and artist managers. Another service, Office Music, organises monthly recitals in cubicles and conference rooms around New York. Founder David Whitwell says that companies pay up to \$14,000 a year for the service and musicians are paid \$200 for a 45- to 60-minute

way to do that is to get experience playing for a crowd, building up your chops in this low-impact way, and developing stage charisma.'

Bodkin is more eager to talk about Groupmuse's expansion efforts. He outlines his plans for a 'freemium' membership scheme, in which the most active guests will pay a small monthly fee to attend events and receive various perks including discounts at major arts organisations. Part of the goal is to manage serial attendees who monopolise slots week after week. Also being explored are corporate sponsorships and more ticketed 'Massivemuse' events. 'The aim is to be fully sustainable by the time we've spent every dollar of the Kickstarter funding,' adds Bodkin.

It's an ambitious plan given other potential challenges that loom, such as local municipalities looking into safety concerns among peer-to-peer services (private homes are frequently not held to the same legal and regulatory standards that protect both hosts and guests at private businesses). But for now, Groupmuse appears to be riding a healthy momentum, with press coverage from major news outlets including the *CBS Nightly News*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Guardian*.

In the third week of December, the company reported its busiest week to date, with 30 events in cities across the US.

At a Sunday afternoon Groupmuse event on Manhattan's Upper West Side, guests snack on coffee cake, crisps and pretzels while the Madkoi Quartet, from the Manhattan School of Music, play Dvořák's 'American' String Quartet. The host, Violetta Norrie, isn't that worried about welcoming strangers (including a *BBC Music Magazine* reporter) into her home. 'It's a chill crowd and these are people who might not otherwise attend a concert in the red velvet surroundings of Lincoln Center,' she says. As if to underscore her point, the quartet launch into their final piece, a cover of Clean Bandit's perky pop song '(No Place I'd) Rather Be'. ■

## OPEN HOUSE

Four up-coming Groupmuse concerts



**PRIVATE NOTES:** guests bring their own drinks

### 16 April, New York

Violinist Jocelyn Zhu and friends perform works by Bach, Shostakovich, Borodin and Schubert. Says host Chance Huskey, 'As we leave behind, in theory, our 20- or 30-degree days, let us celebrate the coming warmth together with some timeless music.'

### 23 April, Seattle

Guitar duo Michael Partington and Marc Teicholz perform the Variations from Brahms's Op. 18 Sextet and Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *Sonata Canonica*. 'Attendees will be asked to make a donation (minimum \$10) all of which goes to the musicians. Please bring any drinks and snacks you'd like to share,' suggests the host.

### 29 April, New York

Pianist Audrey Vardanega performs at a home near Union Square for a 'low-key 20s crowd'. 'My 'muses are well attended by people who've never met each other before,' says host Felix Feist, 'so it's always a very open crowd and nobody gets left out. We have chips and dips, and if you're lucky (and early) a few beers on the house.'

### 15 April, Boston

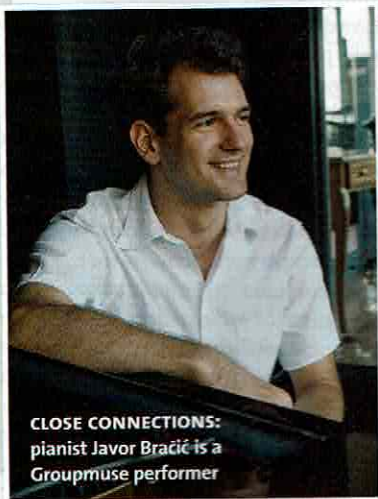
A special Groupmuse 'Massivemuse' hosted by radio station WCRB invites the Boston Cello Quartet to perform works by Granados, Chabrier, Albéniz, Piazzola and some Mozart. 'It's \$10 at the door with a cash bar,' goes the blurb, 'unless you're a WCRB member, in which case you come in for free and you drink for free!'

Exact venues are only revealed once you have RSVPd to the Groupmuse.

## 'Every musician can expect to earn at least \$50 per event'

performance. Whitwell, a trombonist, is sharply critical of Groupmuse. 'If they're not even concerned with guaranteeing pay for the central product of their entire organisation, then you have to question their entire motives,' he says.

In December, after online pundits began to ask questions about compensation, Groupmuse issued a lengthy statement asserting that every musician can expect to earn at least \$50 per event, and that the current average is \$83. Bodkin added in an interview that while he's a 'firm believer in workers' rights', an artist shouldn't bid on a Groupmuse event unless they know what they're getting into. 'This is supposed to be a platform that is grooming the next generation of classical musicians,' says Bodkin. 'The best



**CLOSE CONNECTIONS:** pianist Javor Bračić is a Groupmuse performer



**SALON SOUNDS:** an 18th-century musical gathering