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NIGEL FENNEDY

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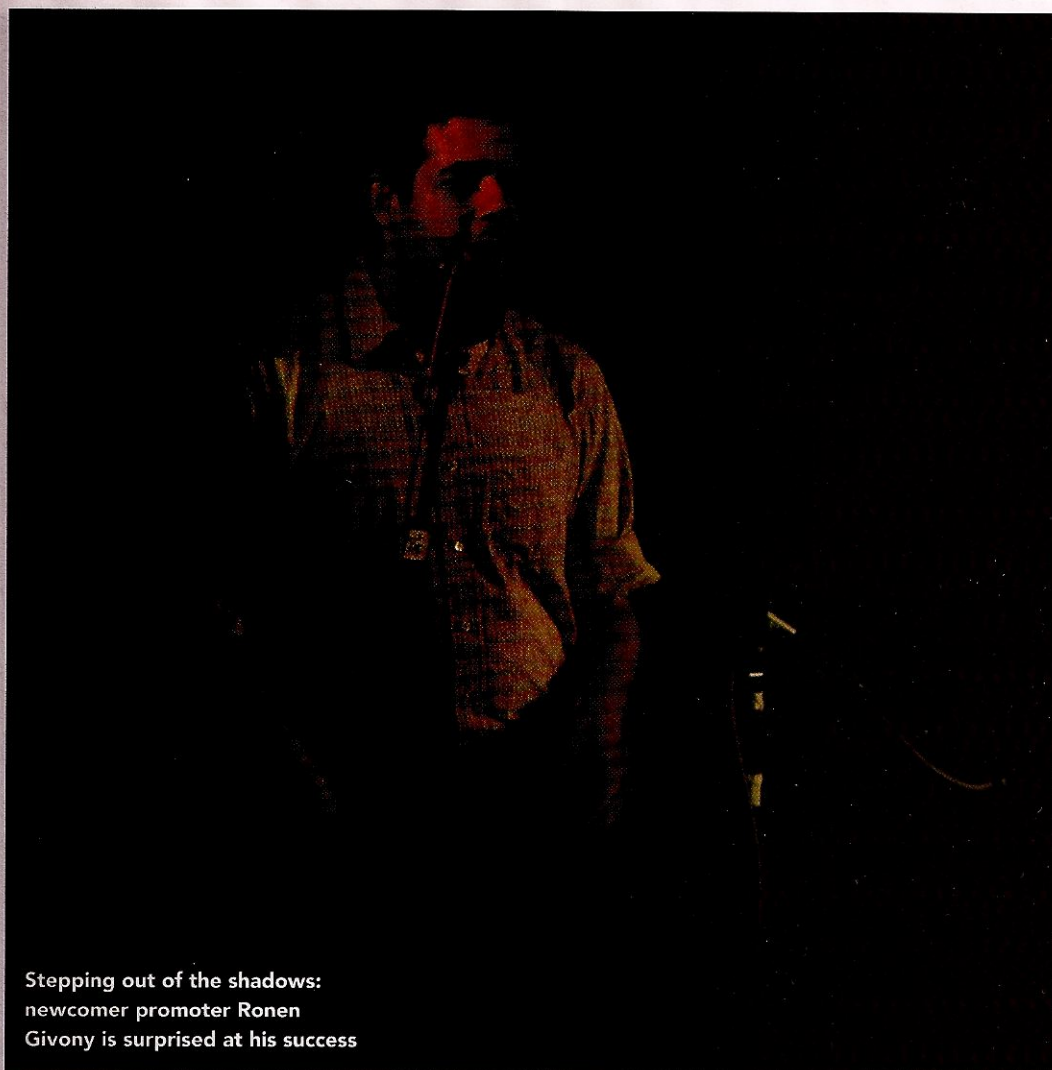
Conductor James Conlon confronts a Mahlerian mystery



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North America focus

Spotlight on the classical scene in the US and Canada



Stepping out of the shadows:
newcomer promoter Ronen
Givony is surprised at his success

Audiences flock to chamber-rock

A young impresario saddened by 'blank faces for Bach' is bridging the musical divide, says Vivien Schweitzer

Ronen Givony may be a relatively late convert to classical music, and until recently had no experience producing concerts, but that hasn't stopped him from becoming one of New York's youngest and most far-sighted classical impresarios. Referring to Givony's "Wordless Music" series, which pairs classical musicians with indie rock and electronica acts, Alex Ross of the *New Yorker* wrote that "there is no more inventive

music series in New York". Indeed, Givony, 28, seems to have hit on a successful formula for attracting the hip, intellectually curious (but new to classical) 20-something segment that marketers are invariably trying (and often failing) to reach.

Givony, who is not a musician and can't read music, says he approaches music "as a fan and as an amateur". He received a Masters in English Literature from Yale in 2001 and began working as a grant writer with the Chamber Music

Society of Lincoln Center in 2005. During his tenure he proposed the Wordless Music series to senior administrators as a way to reach younger audiences, but the idea was turned down "without much of an airing," he says.

But he felt his brainchild had so much potential that he pursued the idea independently, despite the fact he had no experience producing concerts. He is entirely self-taught regarding classical music, and has soaked up ideas and information by

Fifth Veil, based at Bard College Conservatory of Music, bring Golijov to the rock cognoscenti



going to concerts and “just being curious,” which carries over into the series, he says.

Givony managed to score some big-name rock performers even for the first events. The inaugural Wordless concert in September last year, for example, featured percussionist Glenn Kotche of Grammy Award-winning rock band Wilco. The line-up that evening also included pianist Jenny Lin, who performed Shostakovich and Ligeti.

A concert in April featured the young pianist Gilles Vonsattel playing Bartók and Ravel, Portland guitarist Matthew Cooper, and Amiina, an Icelandic string quartet whose performances incorporate percussion, harps, zithers and

keyboards. A September concert this year featured the band Beirut and music by Chopin, Scriabin, Arvo Pärt and Bartók. Next year sees the first local performance of

cent of the audience attends because of the rock acts, says Givony. At rock clubs, he would look at the people around him and think how strange it was

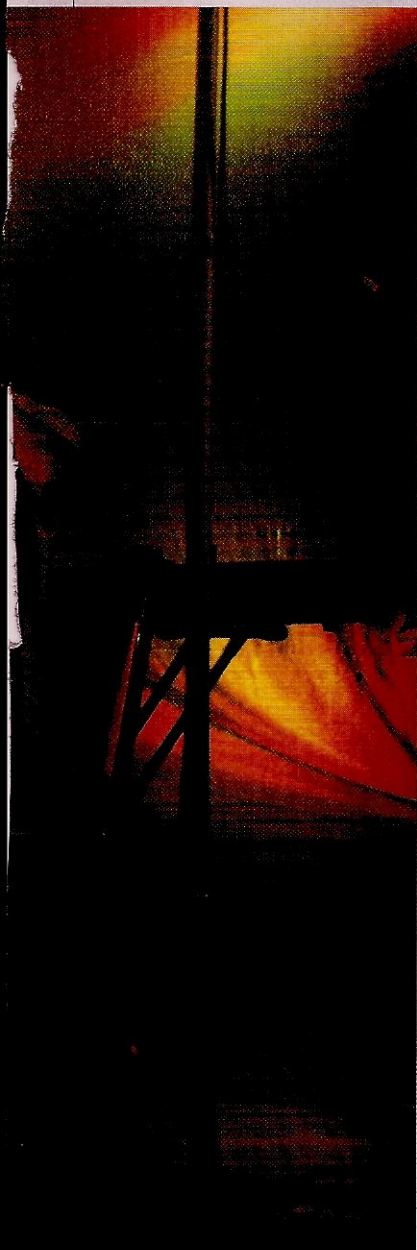
It was a tough sell to persuade people from the rock side to sign on

Radiohead member Jonny Greenwood’s orchestral work *Popcorn Superbet Receiver*, programmed alongside works by John Adams and Gavin Bryars. More than 90 per

they knew so much about Sonic Youth and David Byrne and “very weird experimental music, but as soon as the conversation shifts to Schubert or Bach a blank look comes on their faces”. He realised

that this audience “is not being especially well served by outreach efforts by Lincoln Center or even Carnegie Hall, and so my whole reason for doing it was that I wanted to begin converting my fellow rock’n’roll fans to chamber music”.

Givony, who left Lincoln Center recently, points out that his target audience, who are not listening to standard rock fare, seem intellectually curious and inquisitive “and ripe for being turned on to the sound world of someone who would meet them halfway about classical music. The world of chamber music and instrumental music, and how great Haydn and Mendelssohn trios were, was a major revelation



some of the hard work has been done now."

When he approaches classical performers he tells them that they "can assume that for 25-30 minutes you will have a respectful, earnest, attentive audience, but granted an audience that for the most part has never been to a classical music concert". So the listeners might be a little nervous about whether to applaud between movements, for example. So he advises performers to choose repertoire that people will not only actually sit through but, more importantly, "think, 'wow, I've been missing out' and secondly 'I need to come back to this'."

He gives the musicians almost complete discretion over what to play, adding, "they know much better than I do. They're qualified to make that decision".

In the first season, Givony spent a lot of time actively pursuing musicians and badgering agents and publicists, but he says performers are now approaching him. All the concerts have ended in the black, which surprised him, especially because as a novice producer he had no idea how to finance such events. The concerts have taken place in venues around the city, including churches, the Society for Ethical Culture and the Brooklyn Masonic Temple. As for the

name? Givony was reading a press release that described a singer's "wordless vocals" and it struck him as a title that could imply a neutral ground between instrumental rock, electronica and classical music. The title has misled some rock groups, however, who have mistakenly thought that they would not be permitted to sing their songs. "But for the most part the title is trying to cover these three sound worlds under this umbrella," he explains.

Givony, who is busy planning future concerts, said he initially never imagined that the series would last beyond two or three concerts and was "stunned" that two concerts sold out. "Everything I was told about Lincoln Center was 'You're an English major, you can't read music, you don't have classical music experience, you aren't a musician, and this is a nice idea in theory but it will never work'."

"Most young people who consider themselves voracious music listeners as a matter of course expect their friends to be familiar with not only rock, but hip-hop and international music, so this [series] is part of moving towards musical landscapes where these sound worlds are neighbours, instead of having this strict firewall between them."

His favourite part of the evening,

says Givony, is when an audience member comes up to him and says something like, "I have no idea how the pianist was playing Bach and could keep two different times with their hands and how do I learn more about that?"

Or, "tell me more about this Osvaldo Golijov guy and why does he sound so much like Beirut and why didn't I know about him before?" ●



Pianist Jenny Lin, an early convert to the idea; Beirut (below) are happy to share the bill with classical artists



to me and I wanted to evangelise on the music's behalf."

Initially, however, Givony had to persuade both the classical and rock acts that this was not a gimmick or a downright silly idea. Some rock agents hope to perform without the classical segment of the show, but Givony insists that as the whole series was founded on the premise of bringing classical music to new audiences, he won't bend regarding that stipulation.

"I could tell you of many conversations I've had with band managers where I said, 'No really, it is 30 minutes of classical music and this will make sense'. It was a tough sell at first and difficult to persuade people from the rock side to sign on for it. But