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Time Out Chicago / Issue 135 : September 27, 2007 - October 3, 2007

House calls

The Fifth House Ensemble plays at the Shedd, and many other places.

By Marc Geelhoed

"We're expecting a very fluid audience," says Adam Marks of the Fifth House Ensemble's concert at the Shedd Aquarium. That's the first of many watery puns dribbling their way through the conversation, and a solid indication of the humor that sets the group apart from its peers. The young chamber ensemble aims to bring fresh music into places where you'd least expect it, and the concert Sunday 30 may be its most guerilla-style effort yet.



OFF THE BEATEN PATH The Fifth House Ensemble plays for a patient at Children's Memorial Hospital, one of its many unexpected venues.

Photo: Angela Garbot

The Fifth House Ensemble was formed in Chicago in 2005 by five musicians who had spent time in the Civic Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony's training ensemble, and who wanted to play chamber music. But they really wanted to present their performances in different ways than a formal concert. "We're really fascinated by getting audiences who think they're going to see something and [then] giving them something else to enjoy and learn from," says pianist Marks. "We think it's important to collaborate with experts in their own specialties." The group's played at Children's Memorial Hospital and Danny's Tavern, and, in a rare nod to tradition, will give its first subscription series of formal concerts in November at the West Loop's Merit School of Music.

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Marks, the group's newest member, lives in New York, where he's earning a Ph.D. in piano performance at New York University. He organized the Shedd concerts. "This has been a dream for a while," he says, and working with Fifth House allows him to use the smarts he developed while working for the Boston Pops Orchestra before graduate school. There's a limit to what he can do for the group from New York, so he shares the concert-organizing work with cellist Herine Coetzee.

The concert at the Shedd is actually three shows scattered throughout the day. The group will set up in the local waters gallery near the aquarium's main rotunda, where it'll play three half-hour sets. No chairs will be set out, so people are encouraged to listen however long they desire, but the musicians will talk about the music between pieces. "We were not about to walk into the Shedd, play in front of fish and call it a day," Marks says. He worked with the Shedd's director of education, Lee Peters, to devise programs and scripts (loose scripts, Marks emphasizes) to show how, say, light can be refracted in water just as sound is refracted in music. "We want to be like another exhibit," Marks says. "It'll be like in an art museum: If you see something you like, you can stay and enjoy it, and when you're ready to move on, you move on." (He hopes people will stay for the entire set.)

As far as the Shedd is concerned, its staff is glad to have the ensemble on board. "The music is an educational experience," says John Buranosky, the aquarium's assistant director of tourism, who also helped organize the concert, explaining that

they didn't simply want a group of anonymous musicians tooting away for no clear reason.

Fifth House's exuberance will no doubt help it make further inroads into Chicago's cultural institutions. Marks won't give out any specifics about future collaborations, but says, "We are always looking for museums, galleries, theaters, any type of cultural institution" to work with. Such a list guards against the high chance of hearing "no" over and over, and increases the likelihood of getting in the door. "Whether it involves art, or food, or community life, or culture, we want to be there," he says. That means they could be just about anywhere, which is just the point.

The Fifth House Ensemble swims with the fishes Sunday 30.

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