

Tuning the Air

PRESS CLIPPINGS



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The Score

Seattle Circle's "Tuning in the Air" Concert Series
by CHRISTOPHER DELAURENTI

Space is a crucial and often overlooked element of performance; you know a good space when you hear it. An acoustically lush venue can bless the most careless musician with a rich sound that magnifies the music, adding presence and depth. Of course, most venues have no acoustic signature: Shrewd musicians compensate by fastidiously arranging themselves onstage and calibrating their instruments. Carefully considering the listener's eyes and ears can make a good space sound great.

Seattle Circle, an octet of acoustic guitarists, use space masterfully. I caught their Tuning the Air concert series late last year at CHAC and a few weeks ago at their current home, the Fremont Abbey. Neither venue should win any prizes for design; both are boxy and functional. The Fremont Abbey has a ceiling that somehow looks lower than it actually is. Despite such flaws, Seattle Circle take sonic command of the space. The ensemble sit on stools placed on slightly raised platforms. All eight musicians ring the audience in a tight circle and envelop you in music.

I can't decide what is more impressive about Seattle Circle—their astonishing collective precision or how their seating arrangement transforms the music. It's like being inside a giant zither; strums, chords, and melodies not only sail over your head, but tilt and rotate around you. The sound moves with a method. Seattle Circle rely on virtuosic listening as well as on cues such as eye contact and gently pushing the guitar's headstock toward one another to "pass" the sound around the circle.

The music ranges from winning covers of "Kashmir" and Brian Wilson's inconsolable lament "In My Room" to pieces influenced by the classical guitar tradition, flamenco, progressive rock, and the avant. Seattle Circle always open with "Tuning the Air," a marvelous Steve Reich-like tapestry of meticulously picked notes. If you plan to catch the two remaining Fremont Abbey shows, arrive early for a plum seat in the center. If Monday is too early in the week for you, Seattle Circle will sound splendid in the spacious and acoustically lush Chapel Performance Space.

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PRESS CLIPPINGS

A PERFECT CIRCLE

By Ross Simonini
December 2006



A group of local strummers puts a fresh spin on the traditional guitar ensemble. In a small building adjoining Trinity Methodist Church in Ballard, 10 acoustic guitarists march down a hallway, picking through lush, sweeping arpeggios. The musicians enter a dim white room and form a circle around a small audience seated on pillows in the center of the space. Two dancers sway through the room like wraiths while guitar notes swirl around the crowd, passing from one guitarist to another clockwise, then counterclockwise, then jumping across the audience and swelling from all sides. Within the opening moments of *Tuning the Air*, the newest project of the Seattle Circle (SC)-a local acoustic guitar ensemble that plays various musical styles in the round-it's clear that the group has turned traditional guitar performance on its head.

The roots of SC's unusual performance style date back to 1984, when Robert Fripp, trailblazing guitarist of the seminal prog-rock group King Crimson, founded a series of experimental guitar seminars at the American Society for Continuous Education in Claymont Court, West Virginia. Titled *Guitar Craft*, these seminars featured classes on everything from rudimentary guitar techniques to alternate guitar tunings, as well as non-guitar-based activities such as meditation and philosophical discussion. The idea behind Fripp's holistic, if somewhat new age-y, approach was for his students to develop both as guitarists and human beings. Soon after the first of these seminars, guitarists around the world began establishing "Guitar Circles" as a way to study, teach and perform *Guitar Craft* methods.

In 1994, local guitarists-including celebrated strummer Steve Ball, who has performed with

Fripp-founded SC. After five years of private study, the ensemble went public, performing *The Secret Cafe*, a series of concerts held in now-defunct local venues Queen Anne Coffee House and *The Speakeasy*. Instead of playing on a stage during these shows, SC experimented with nontraditional musician placement (a *Guitar Craft* technique), scattering performers randomly around the room or performing in the round-a formation that's become the ensemble's signature. By arranging and performing music in such a way that each guitarist is responsible for individual notes in specific locations within the circle-a technique SC member Curt Golden calls "circulation"-the group has put a fresh spin on the traditional guitar ensemble. Since its initial performances, SC has grown to 16 active members (most of whom play with the group part-time) and has performed at festivals such as *Bumbershoot* and the *Northwest Folklife Festival*, as well as at the *Seattle Art Museum*. By far the collective's most ambitious and public endeavor, *Tuning the Air* adds theatrical elements to SC's in-the-round performance style-including light shows, chanting and the above-mentioned dancers. In the midst of all this, the group performs music from a variety of genres, such as classical, pop and ambient. A recent SC performance included 360-degree versions of *Jeffes' "Music for a Found Harmonium"* and *The Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby."*

In addition to its concerts, SC offers three-hour group workshops and six-day seminars for guitarists searching for new approaches. One of its most recent courses, *Tuning the Air-The Weekly Workshop*, welcomed guitarists of all levels and included part- and full-time teachers such as Golden, Frank Sheldon and *laxie Binder*, who says, "I'd like [people] to be inspired by our presence in the neighborhood, in the Seattle music scene and in the *Guitar Craft* community." Judging by the fans and students who flock to SC's events, it appears *Binder's* wish has already come true.

Tuning the Air

PRESS CLIPPINGS

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

Monday Nite in Seattle

March 6, 2006

Angelo Bruscas:

Monday nights often can seem pretty dull in Seattle, with many restaurants and nightclubs dark for the evening, few tourists scurrying about the city like on a Friday or Saturday night, and not a lot on the live music menu worth sampling.

But for the next 40 weeks, Monday nights in an intimate room in Ballard are filled with some of the most amazing guitar sounds that resonate with the essence of Seattle's diverse music scene, taking performance art to the people in a unique and wholly uplifting way.

Called Tuning The Air, a group of nine or 10 acoustic guitarists performs in the round for an audience seated on plush pillows on the floor of Seattle Circle Performance Space in the north annex of the Trinity Methodist Church (6512 23rd Ave. NW). The evening begins with interpretive dancers in crimson, followed by a solemn entrance by the guitarists, all dressed in black pants and cream-colored shirts, each seated on a stool surrounding the audience, which is served tea to begin.

Like wind chimes in perfect tune, or hand bells played in a church choir, the guitarists start with cascading individual notes that build into a guitar orchestra, ranging from original compositions to interpretations of classics. Monday night's first performance even featured a reworked, soaring version of the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby."

Tuning the Air is a project of the Seattle Guitar Circle. Rather than touring to find its audience, the Seattle Guitar Circle "is bringing the concept of the location-based performance team to Seattle," according to the group's Web site: www.tuningtheair.com.

Last year, the group did 39 performances, which change each week, and can also include dance, vocals and special guests.

Music director and co-producer Curt Golden describes the process as pure collaboration, everything from the writing, composition and performance.

"A lot of what we do is structurally improvised," said Golden, who first started playing guitar at 11 and is a teacher of the method known as Guitar Craft, presented by legendary progressive guitarist Robert Fripp. "From that, all sorts of ideas come. The music we do doesn't fit into any one category, but you will recognize the flavor of all of them."

There are classical flavors, rock flavors, blues, jazz, even shades of new age.

"It's a little bit like chamber music because it's a bunch of acoustic instruments, but we're guitarists, so there is a lot of rock n' roll in it," Golden said.

The array of guitars are not tuned traditionally, they are tuned in a cello-type tuning as part of the Guitar Craft. And the performers all differ in levels of ability and technique, creating an unusual ensemble with a multi-layered circle of sound.

"Part of the culture for this is the notion that even a modest player has something to contribute," Golden said. "So we have people of all levels here."

Golden has an impressive resume in the music business. After studying at the Berklee College of Music in Boston, Curt played in a number of rock, blues, and jazz bands, and went on to record and tour extensively with the League of Crafty Guitarists. He also taught guitar and performed with a number of groups in New York City, including the rock band Desperate Measures, and then moved to Seattle to stay in 1998.

Monday nights works perfectly for the group, and this Monday was the group's initial performance for 2006. It also was the perfect place to spend 45 minutes away from the normal nightly news of the graveyard shift at the P-I.

"Part of the reasoning behind why we do this on Monday nights is we are not competing with the Crocodile Cafe, it's not a traditional date night, it's early in the evening, and it's only a 45-minute show," Golden said of why the group set Mondays for its showcase. "The music starts at eight, and by nine o'clock, you're on your way home, hopefully having had a wonderful and illuminating experience."

www.tuningtheair.com

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