

NEXT Ensemble: Us rather than Me
by Carey Campbell

Confession time: I keep finding fewer and fewer reasons to leave the house. If I want to see a movie, I've got Netflix for that. If I want to hear some obscure Stockhausen piece or Aretha Franklin B-side, there's no need to go to the record store—Spotify and YouTube have me covered. I can watch an entire season of *Seinfeld* at 4:30am on a Tuesday if I feel like it. It's all about Me now.

In contrast, NEXT Ensemble offers an entertainment experience that is about Us. There's no stage, and the audience sits really close to the performers, mostly on couches. If my friend comes in late and I want to get up and greet her even though there's a piece being played, NEXT is fine with that. It doesn't mean I'm disrespecting the music or the cellist performing it or whatever — it just means I get to be myself and show my friend she's welcome there. I can buy the cellist a drink during intermission to make up for it because the musicians actually mingle with the audience. They are part of Us.

NEXT Ensemble isn't a fixed ensemble, like an orchestra or a string quartet. It's more a collection of really good singers and instrumentalists — mostly from the Ogden area — who are brought together for particular performances. This flexibility means they are able to present a wide variety of concerts, as is obvious by looking at the first three concerts of 2017. In January, the "New Year, New Music" concert featured modern classical music by local composers, played on clarinet, piano, violin, cello, vibraphone, bass, and electronics. But February's concert, "Sultry Valentine's" will be cabaret-style, with a singer and pianist doing Broadway songs and Jazz. In March acclaimed cowboy poet Clive Romney and his band Willingly celebrate Utah's Old-West heritage in verse and song. Last year I dressed up as a Leprechaun and hosted a children's concert for the group. Go figure.

I'd venture to say that people don't go to NEXT Ensemble concerts solely for the music. With so much variety, there's bound to be some hit-or-miss with audiences, and as I've said, if I want to hear something specific that I know and like and nothing else, I've got other means for that. Folks go to NEXT Ensemble concerts to be with other people, to be entertained and dazzled by a living person standing in front of them, and to enjoy a shared experience that literally cannot be replicated anywhere else.

In keeping with the spirit of Us rather than Me, NEXT Ensemble donates a portion of its ticket sales to another non-profit organization. Last year the beneficiary was One Heart Worldwide, and this year it is Youth Impact. They are dedicated not just to the music they play and their audiences who hear it, but also to improving the lives of others across the world and in their own community.

This is how the Arts will survive. By remaining connected to people, about Us rather than Me, it will always be urgent and relevant. And to that end, NEXT Ensemble is surely playing its part.