New home for music's Bowerbird

By A.D. Amorosi
FOR THE INQUIRER

Several days before Christmas, the brain trust of Bowerbird — the Philadelphia nonprofit responsible for booking and presenting avant-garde music, dance, and related live art forms — sat in the pews of the University Lutheran Church at 36th and Chestnut, playing bingo and drinking craft beer. It's their new home: Bowerbird boss Dustin Hurt and friends were, in fact, celebrating the nonprofit's new office and its first-ever home performance space for live showcases.

"We wanted an intimate room with great acoustics and its own piano," Hurt said.

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Bowerbird

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The brown-brick University Lutheran Church also has its own organ and organist (Matthew Glandorf, director of the Choral Arts Society), 50-foot-high ceilings, and room for up to 150 attendees. "The Lutherans love their music," Hurt says, "and this room sounds amazing." Bowerbird's first concert there was on Jan. 29, when its new-music "house band," Arcana, took the stage.

"We're officially 10 years old this year and have certainly grown from being super-DIY and doing shows in warehouses, galleries, and off-the-grid underground spaces," said Hurt. They haven't officially ruled out grungy spaces like that: "We just evolved into something a little more traditional — a small nonprofit with the mission of presenting contemporary experimental music and art, only now connecting with other music and art."

For Hurt and fellow Bowerbird directors (and bandmates) Thomas Patteson, Elizabeth Huston, and Michael Tan, Bowerbird's current mission is connectivity — not just to other music, such as the Tuvan Throat Singers (who performed there recently), but also to local artists like Pig Iron Theatre (their first event together was in 2016). They also want to reach out to West Philadelphia itself as they delve into performance spaces beyond their own. "There was a time when Bowerbird was mostly me," Hurt said with a laugh. "It's beautiful that so many arts organizations are expressing interest in working with us."

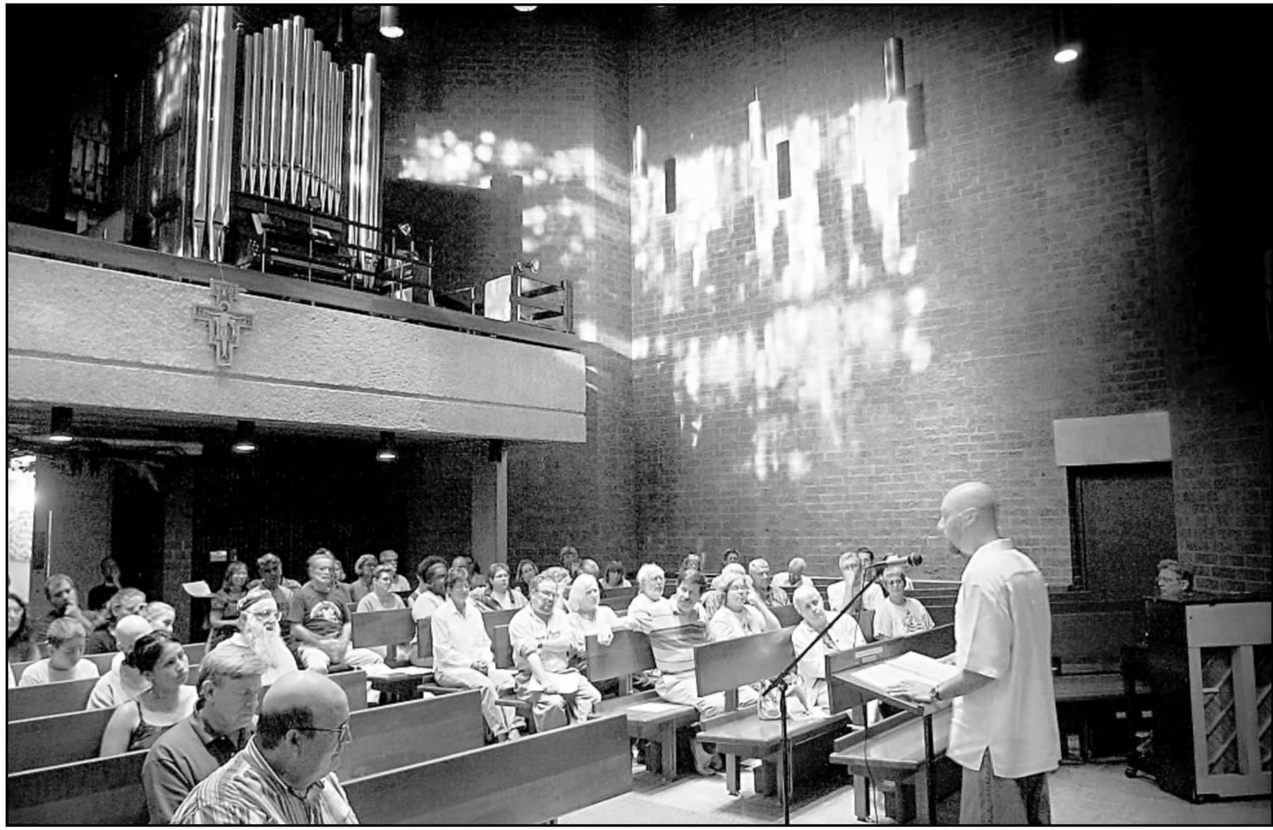
"We're rooted," Hurt said, "in the experimental music that grew out of America and Europe in the 1950s and '60s but now are looking to connect the dots with what is happening now, worldwide, in and out of the mainstream." Bowerbird will continue to stretch into dance, film, and theater collaborations as it did in June, when it collaborated with Pig Iron on a concert at Fleisher Art Memorial titled "Samuel Beckett, Words and Music."

On Feb. 24, Arcana will collaborate with Philly's Prometheus Chamber Orchestra in a concert of John Cage's *Harmonies from Apartment House 1776* and music of Telemann and Andriessen.

On March 10, Arcana will team with vocal ensemble Variant 6 (featuring members of the new-music vocal group the Crossing) for Morton Feldman's *Voices and Instruments II*. The goal is to perform upward of 20 concerts a year, a large number for any chamber ensemble.

Bowerbird will continue to present larger events at the Rotunda (as it has for 10 years), across the city (the architecturally rich Church of the Advocate at 18th and Diamond, for example), and will do additional shows in West Philly in rooms such as the gorgeous Chinese Rotunda at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. "University Lutheran is our bread-and-butter, but we love exploring architecturally sound spaces that are new to us and our audiences," Patteson said.

Hurt said that though new music often gets a bad rap, Bowerbird wants to give audiences diverse opportunities and "genre-bending" events in which to hear even the most dissonant, challenging, out-there music — "and make it fun."



University Lutheran Church's space gives Bowerbird "an intimate room with great acoustics and its own piano," said Bowerbird director Dustin Hurt. File Photograph