

All Jazzed Up

A Manhattan church attracts the arts community with jazz and classical music

Each week, nearly 6,000 people in the Manhattan area choose between classical or jazz—not what CD to pop in, but what church service to go to. One may feature a jazz quintet complete with drums, bass, electric guitar, saxophone, piano and vocalists. The other offers classical music with rotating string and brass ensembles, occasional choirs and instrumentalists on piano and harp.

FAST FACTS

Church: Redeemer Presbyterian Church

Senior Pastor:

Tim Keller

Location:

New York City
(Manhattan)

Launched: 1989

Target audience:

Artists and young professionals

Web site:

redeemer.com

For six years, Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City has been attracting artists, musicians and young professionals from its overwhelmingly secular neighborhood to its four unique worship settings—two jazz and two classical—all led by top-notch musicians, including a few Grammy winners.

The church could've been successful with other musical genres, explains Tom Jennings, Redeemer's director of worship and arts. But in 1989 when Redeemer's planting team researched the area, it found that contemporary Christian music wasn't on the radar screen. Instead, it was jazz and classical music that had deep roots in the community.

"It's about making a place where people can feel very comfortable bringing friends," Jennings explains.

"We feel this is the best way for us to create a climate to do evangelism because both musical styles are so rich and have such a wide palette."

Not only does the music attract those who want a fulfilling worship experience, it also affords numerous opportunities for artists and musicians to get involved in the church by doing something they

enjoy—even if they're not Christians. Congregation surveys indicate that up to 25% of Redeemer attendees identify themselves as "unsure of what

they believe" or even rejecting Christianity.

Patricia Davis used to be one of those people. A professional violinist who plays at impressive venues including Carnegie Hall, she had drifted from her childhood faith.

Invited to Redeemer by friends, she walked into the church

and saw the internationally renowned viola player Lawrence Dutton on stage. She also bumped into former classmates from her days at the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music, who later invited her to play at one of the upcoming services and sent her some of Senior Pastor Tim Keller's sermon tapes.

Although the people were friendly, it →

"Since I became a Christian, I sing differently. It's not all about me anymore. It's about making a joyful noise unto the Lord."

—Belinda Oswald, Redeemer member



TO THE BEAT OF THE COMMUNITY: About 20% of Redeemer Presbyterian Church's nearly 6,000 regular attendees are professional artists, many of whom contribute to the church's jazz and classical worship settings each Sunday.



Photos: Redeemer Presbyterian Church

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was the church's appreciation for music that drew her back the next weekend, she says. "I returned and heard the Gospel, and I heard something I'd never heard before."

Redeemer estimates that about 200 people like Davis come to know Christ each year through an aspect of its music ministry, which includes a monthly concert series held at nearby Theater 315 featuring well-known performers. For professional and aspiring musicians, weekly home fellowship groups include Bible study and discussion of specific music industry issues. And Redeemer also publishes music; the church Web site offers an online library and store of CDs and musical compositions by Redeemer musicians.

And even though not all of Redeemer's visitors and members are musicians or Mozart or Miles Davis connoisseurs, classical and jazz music does help create an atmosphere of familiarity and identification, Jennings says.

The music doesn't stand alone at Redeemer, but is tightly knit with the messages. Keller's preaching style resonates with New Yorkers like professional musician Belinda Oswald who tend to be intellectual and like to be addressed as such.

Oswald first visited Redeemer in 1994; two years later, she put her faith in Christ as the string ensemble played Mozart and Keller spoke of Christ's sacrifice. Now active in Redeemer's music ministry, Oswald says Christ's presence in her life has changed the way she sings.

"Even when I sing at the Met, I worship God," she says. "Since I became a Christian, I sing differently. It's not all about me anymore. It's about making a joyful noise unto the Lord."

Seeing the countenance of people in worship on Sundays tells her that more people are coming to know Christ.

"It's an awesome thing," she says. "It's not just the volume, it's the manner in how they sing. It's the joy. It just gives me goose bumps."

—Roy Harryman



Photo: Redeemer Presbyterian Church

WHAT'S IMPORTANT: "Established musical traditions such as classical music and jazz make people in our community comfortable. It's important to them that our faith wasn't 'created' in the last 20 years," explains Tom Jennings, Redeemer's worship and arts director.



PASTOR'S NOTES

Principles for Ministering to Artists

Be proactive. "There are a lot of artists and musicians everywhere. I don't think you have to be in a place like New York to be proactive about loving artists and ministering to them. You just need to be aware that with artists, it's important that things *not* be slick. They don't want to be manipulated, and they don't want you trying to sell them something."

Be non-exclusive. "Being seeker-oriented and traditional doesn't mean needing to be mutually exclusive. The Gospel message is the key to accepting the faith and then growing in that faith. You don't need to preach two different things."

Communicate with style. "Our senior pastor, Tim Keller, usually articulates people's doubts better than they can themselves. We really avoid Christian jargon. We've gotten in the habit of speaking in ways that a non-believer is comfortable with. It creates an environment that allows you to say, 'I know it's going to be OK to bring a friend to this Bible study.'"

Tom Jennings has served as director of worship and arts at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan since 1975. A classical pianist himself, Jennings has composed more than 100 sacred and secular works, performed both on- and off-Broadway shows and played with jazz artist Branford Marsalis, among others.