

A feature from *Gramophone's* monthly guide to North American ensembles
Written by Andrew Farach-Colton - January, 2024

The Sebastians

Founded: 2001

Home: Various churches around Manhattan

New York City may seem to have it all when it comes to classical music concert culture, from traditional institutions such as the Metropolitan Opera to cutting-edge venues like the Brooklyn Academy of Music. If you're hankering for early music or period-instrument performances, however, you may have to do some digging. Sure, Carnegie Hall offers a series or two focusing on music from before 1750, but these feature renowned musicians and ensembles imported mostly from the UK and Europe. Home-grown talent is more scattered and tends to fly under most concert-goers' radar.

The Sebastians are a case in point. Born in 2001 from chamber music reading parties, The Sebastians have gradually become one of the bright lights in the city's early music scene (although their shift to period instruments didn't happen until 2009). Their core quartet (violinists Daniel S Lee and Nicholas DiEugenio cellist Ezra Seltzer and harpsichordist Jeffrey Grossman) explores the Baroque and early Classical chamber repertoire, and they draw upon local instrumentalists and singers for works that require larger forces. Through partnerships with choral groups, opera companies and festivals, for example, they've performed Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*, Bach's *St John* and *St Matthew Passions*, Handel's *Messiah* and Mozart's *Requiem*.

Playing mostly in churches around Manhattan, The Sebastians currently present eight concerts a season, and they're more adventurous in their programming than most period-instrument ensembles. 'Our goal is to bring Baroque music to life for our can be found on their extensive YouTube channel audiences, says Jeffrey Grossman, 'whether by juxtaposing lesser-known with more familiar works, or with unusual combinations of composers (later this season, interweaving Corelli's violin sonatas with solo harpsichord works of Rameau) or connecting sers through a common thread (as in this season's finale, Lully, Muffat and Corelli connected by their large string ensembles). We try to take an inventive approach to sometimes-familiar repertoire, to make it feel alive again.'

To this end, The Sebastians often turn to artists who work outside of music. 'Of our self-produced concerts, about half include an interdisciplinary element,' Grossman says. 'We've commissioned and collaborated with poets, painters, spoken-word artists, a ballet company, a hip hop dancer and actors, all in the last few seasons.' In 2022, for

instance, they collaborated with choreographer Christopher Caines, who created ballets to a trio of suites by Bach.

They also incorporate contemporary music into some programmes, and their first self-published recording, *Night Scenes from the Ospedale* (2015), interleaved new, nocturnal works by Robert Honstein with a selection of concertos from Vivaldi's *L'estro armonico*. Two other recordings have also been released, entitled 'Virtuoso Music of the Holy Roman Empire' (2015) and 'Folia' (2018). The recordings are all stylishly expressive, but a broader view of The Sebastians' activities can be found on their extensive [YouTube channel](#).

Future plans include a one-voice-per-part Bach B minor Mass, a reconstructed *St Mark Passion*, collaborations with drag queens and projection artists, educational programmes for young musicians interested in early music, and more web content like their brilliant 2018 YouTube video of Vivaldi's *La folia*, which has already amassed more than 186,000 views.