

Rethinking the Accordion in Bryant Park

Park Program Runs Through July; As an Instrument, Think Banana

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Sounds of Bryant Park: the Calpulli Accordion Student Ensemble *Craig Warga for The Wall Street Journal*

Whose idea was it to have accordion music in Bryant Park anyway? Tunes from around the world, filling the air Tuesday evenings during the spring and early summer.

"Dan," answered Ethan Lercher, the park's director of public events. "But he had the idea probably six years ago. The idea was to have accordions in the park at different times during the day."

Mr. Lercher was referring to Dan Biederman, who also has ties to the park as president of Bryant Park Corp., a nonprofit management company.

"He saw it in a few places in France. He was in love with the French music played by accordion," Mr. Lercher said. "He tried different things for the next three years. It didn't catch a lot of attention."

If I'd been in charge, the takeaway would have been that perhaps people weren't wild about accordions, that the sound of the instrument serenading passersby in the antique charm of the Tuileries or the Luxembourg Gardens couldn't quite command the attention of harried New Yorkers among the cacophony of Midtown.

I have nothing against accordions, even though I don't find them the most soulful of musical instruments.

If an accordion were a fruit, in my opinion, it wouldn't be a sun-ripened peach, but a banana; something that has defensible virtues but doesn't quite ignite the imagination.

It's probably unfair, but when I think of accordion players, even Parisian ones, I think of people playing music you don't want to hear at outdoor cafes and then hitting you up for spare change.

However, Mr. Biederman and his staff deduced a different message.

"Our idea was to expand the program beyond one person," Mr. Lercher explained. "Ariana and I came up with the idea of having multiple accordions throughout the park."

That would be Ariana Hellerman, the producer of the concert series, appropriately called Accordions Around the World.

Ms. Hellerman added: "If we're going to push an accordion agenda, what better way? Where else are you going to see multiple accordions in one place?"



The fingerwork of Suzanne Davenport *Craig Warga for The Wall Street Journal*

This year's program started in May and continues through July; single musicians play accordion music from France to Colombia and from the Balkans to the bayou throughout the park at 5 p.m. Then at 6 p.m., a band performs at the Fountain Terrace, which is on the west side of the park.

This is Accordions Around the World's second year.

"It was big," last year, Ms. Hellerman reported. "We got a ton of press and partnered with the American Accordion Association."

The stars aligned so that the association's members, in town for their annual convention, made their way to Bryant Park for what sounds like Accordion Woodstock.

"Last year we had possibly 200 accordionists who were here on the terrace," Ms. Hellerman boasted.

The scene was a bit more subdued when I dropped by last week. Actually it wasn't. A widescreen TV had been set up in the park for the World Cup match between the U.S. and Belgium, attracting hundreds of fans.

Every time the U.S. threatened, a huge roar went up from the crowd, drowning out the sound of accordion performers such as Maria Dessena.

After completing her cover of the Police's "Message in a Bottle," Ms. Dessena told me she believes that perception of the accordion has changed in the last few years. It has become cool.

"I do a lot of night life stuff," she explained. "I see a lot of accordions in a rock band context." Might the accordion even be considered the hipster instrument of choice?

"I could see it being perceived that way," said Ms. Dessena, who lives in Jersey City. She bought hers at a thrift shop for \$100. "It's gotten me my money's worth," she attested. About 100 feet east of Ms. Dessena stood Joseph Rutkowski, whose day job is head of music at Great Neck North High School. Mr. Rutkowski was playing Polish, Italian and French tunes.

"It's a great idea, if it wasn't for the competition from the soccer game," observed Phyllis Elsky, one of two women listening to Mr. Rutkowski play.

Ms. Elsky revealed herself to be Mr. Rutkowski's mother-in-law, the woman seated beside her his wife, Lisa.

"He can never resist playing music," Ms. Elsky confided. "He'll come to any party."

Even more relatives were listening to the Calpulli Accordion Student Ensemble, playing traditional Mexican melodies.

One of the musicians was only 10 years old. And all four were playing accordions with buttons rather than keys and making lovely music.

"It's a different sound," explained Juan Castano, one of the founders of Calpulli. "We chose the instrument for its role in Mexican music. Also, this instrument is relatively cheaper," and the organization depends on donations for its youth program.

The largest accordion crowd was seated around Suzanne Davenport, who was playing Musette, traditional French popular music.

I asked Ms. Davenport whether she thought the accordion might be undergoing something of a renaissance?

"Absolutely," she said. "It's going on right now. You're sitting in the middle of one."