

Andrew Bird's *Gezelligheid* concert series: "Don't let the human factor fail to be a factor"

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Songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Andrew Bird recently concluded his annual *Gezelligheid* holiday concert series at the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. The performances showcased many of Bird's musical talents and generally humane outlook.

Originally launched in 2009, Bird's *Gezelligheid* series has become a winter staple attended by audience members of all ages. The Dutch term "Gezelligheid" loosely translates to "coziness" or "conviviality" and the overall concert atmosphere in the church is quite beautiful and intimate

The setlist for these concerts typically includes songs from Bird's extensive repertoire, spanning more than two decades. Born in 1973, Bird has created a distinctive blend of indie rock, jazz, folk and classically inspired music since the mid-1990s. He has built a dedicated following over the years with his observant, melodically inventive and intelligent compositions, as well as his exceptional violin playing, whistling and lyrical singing.

With its unique Gothic-inspired architecture, the high-arched space and chandelier lighting of the Fourth Presbyterian Church made the musical experience even more striking. Bird's signature whistling, violin and guitar playing blended seamlessly with the church's acoustics. He was joined by co-performers Alan Hampton on guitar and bass, as well as vocalist and guitarist Nora O'Connor.

The gifted harpist Mary Lattimore opened the concert series. Lattimore's music and harp playing were spellbinding, perfectly suited to the serene atmosphere. The audience listened in hushed silence, captivated by her introspective and thoughtful style. Her playing, characterized by beautiful ascending and descending

melodic crescendos with layered loops, was especially enchanting. (Examples of her performances can be viewed on YouTube from other events.)

Bird and Alan Hampton took the stage following Lattimore's performance. While some songs were unevenly executed, with a few mistakes and false starts due to Bird forgetting song lyrics (which he acknowledged with self-deprecating jokes, eliciting laughter from the audience), the overall setlist was performed with sensitivity and intelligence. The visual lighting and colors for each song were particularly stunning and evocative.

Several of the songs performed by Bird stood out, highlighting both his strengths and limitations. Perhaps the strongest performances were songs from his 2019 album *My Finest Work Yet*, as well as other notable selections from his earlier repertoire that grapple with social issues in intelligent ways.

His songs "Bloodless" and "Sisyphus" from the 2019 album were particularly powerful. These tracks, produced in response to the Trump administration and the challenges of that era, point to Bird's ability to address weighty topics. Following several introspective albums, *My Finest Work Yet* marked a turn toward more serious subjects.

The songs on *My Finest Work Yet* make oblique references to issues such as the housing crisis, the Spanish Civil War, rising social tensions in the United States and the problem of optimism in contemporary times. The album cover art is a collage featuring Bird's face superimposed on Jacques-Louis David's famed painting *The Death of Marat* (1793), depicting the murder of French revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat (1743–1793).

“They’re profiting from your worry,” Bird sings in “Bloodless.” Released as a single in late 2018 and performed exceptionally well at the concert, the song includes lines such as, “They’re banking on the sound and fury... Bloodless for now.” It references Catalonia in 1936 and warns of the dangers of an “uncivil war.” Yet, the song also reflects liberal unease with class divisions, quoting W. B. Yeats’ “The Second Coming”: “Well, the best lack all conviction / And the worst keep sharpening their claws.” This perspective, perhaps indicative of affluent liberal circles, contrasts with the broader radicalization of society then and now.

In an interview about “Bloodless,” Bird explained, “I wrote that song between 2016 and Charlottesville,” referencing the fascist rampage incited by Trump in 2017. “So, it’s not that I set out to write a political song per se, but I’m just alive in this time and I’m an artist, and I’m absorbing what’s around me.”

We also noted, however, in a previous review of the album, there “is a tendency to be inaccessible and a little too satisfied with his own cleverness. Entire songs and even entire albums contain forests of verbose wordplay, which quickly grows tiring.” Bird’s music and lyrics can occasionally feel overly cerebral and calculated, yet his work carries a seriousness and depth that resonate with listeners.

Bird also performed “Tables and Chairs,” a quasi-utopian track from his 2005 album *The Mysterious Production of Eggs*, which responds to the Bush administration era. In it, he reminds listeners, “Don’t let the human factor fail to be a factor,” and envisions a post-collapse world where “there will be tables and chairs / There’ll be pony rides and dancing bears / There’ll even be a band.”

The setlist also included songs from his 2024 album *Sunday Morning Put-On*, a collection of jazz covers inspired by Bird’s time in Chicago listening to late night jazz radio. These tracks, while lighter in tone, were intriguing additions to the performance.

Perhaps the most moving songs were “Alabaster” from his 2020 holiday album *HARK!* and “Pulaski at Night” from his 2013 EP. In “Alabaster,” Bird and his co-performers delivered a poignant appeal to listeners to “keep their lamp on” during dark times, reflecting the intense period of the pandemic in 2020 and the anxiety felt by millions under the Trump administration.

In “Pulaski at Night,” Bird captures the beauty and violence of life in Chicago, singing, “I paint you a picture / But it never looks right,” while hinting at the social tensions along Pulaski Road: “And all of my witnesses / Keep turning up, keep turning up dead.” Yet, the song conveys a sense of optimism in its depiction of the city at night.

Bird’s immense talent was evident throughout the performance, showcasing his virtuosity in singing and switching effortlessly between instruments such as the violin, guitar, and xylophone. Trained in the Suzuki method in the Chicago suburbs, Bird grew up playing Mozart and Bach alongside folk songs before studying violin performance at Northwestern University in 1996. His deep appreciation for musical history—spanning jazz, country, gospel, and rock—and a concern for problems of the world around him infuses his compositions with a genuine life and warmth.

Bird remains somewhat constrained, however, by the political and social outlook that has dominated liberal spheres for decades. His orientation toward the Democratic Party or its orbit also hinders his ability to tackle social life more directly, leading him to often rely on allusive and cryptic lyrics. At his best, however, Bird is one of the more talented contemporary musicians, sensitive to the world around him and bringing an intelligence and beauty to his work that continues to captivate.

A livestream recording of the Gezelligheid can be viewed online till December 26, 2024.



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