

In good spirit

Union Chapel is a major part of Islington community life and one of London's most beautiful music venues. **Cathy Levy** takes a walk down the aisle

Voted as *Time Out's* venue of the year 2002, Union Chapel is many things to many people. Not simply a working church (which it very much is), it's also a registered charity providing a vast range of innovative, culturally diverse projects for homeless people. And with its exceptional acoustics and atmosphere, this beautiful grade II listed building has also served many visiting artistes, all of whom have performed within its hallowed space. Internationally acclaimed talents the likes

of Björk and the Brodsky Quartet, Patti Smith, David Byrne, Eddie Izzard, Ravi Shankar, Beth Orton, Michael Brecker, Morcheeba, Tori Amos and Goldfrapp, to name a few.

This February, the chapel gears up for a unique concert being co-promoted with the Arts Council, by Japanese composer/performer Nobukazu Takemura and Child's View Band, featuring live mixed projections by Aki Tsuyuko. For those unfamiliar with Takemura, his music is not easy to describe; he's been labelled as minimalist, electronica, a hip hop DJ and so on. ▼

faith intermingling, uses the space for many of its concerts, ranging from Klezmer, to jazz and beyond. The London Guitar festival played here, as did the Islington Music Forum. Bob Geldof recently made an appearance with The Borderline and Procol Harum (how could anyone forget *A Whiter Shade of Pale* in 1967) rock the place on 14 December.

But it's not just the famous who get to perform and create here. Union Chapel's homeless project, Margins, benefits some 150 people who use the centre regularly. An extensive participatory and ▼



He continues to defy categorisation; *Spin* called him "an enigma who stitches elegantly guileless symphonies out of a zillion delicate obsessive compulsive ticks". Working with his laptop, Takemura uses his computer like a DJ uses decks, midi or sampler. When he takes to the stage at the Union Chapel, it will be the first time he performs with a live band in this country, creating much excitement from the music community.

The rest of the year, the venue is used by all sorts of organisations, bands and groups. The Jewish Music Institute, creating a spot of multi-

performance arts programme, it allows those ordinarily marginalised by society to feel included and valued. There are art groups, poetry groups and drama, with a performance platform held on the first Sunday of every month, open for all to attend. And every Sunday between 2pm and 5pm, a homeless drop-in centre operates, supervised by 12-15 hard-working volunteers. Those who use the service receive a free hot meal, a place to shelter and socialise, to shower, get a professional haircut, use of a washing machine, luggage lockers and a clothes store. Extremely popular, it was set up in 1995 by the

Union Chapel Congregational Church in response to the amount of rough sleeping literally on the doorstep. Since then it has opened every Sunday including Christmas and Easter.

Much funding is still needed to maintain and restore this beautiful building which was designed by James Cubitt in 1877. The inspiration is said to have come from the octagonal structure of the Sta Fosca, Torcello, north of Venice. Although it faced demolition in the late 80s, it was valiantly saved by the Union Chapel Project (formed in 1991). Much restoration has been



carried out since then and the building is in pretty good shape these days, thanks to generous support from the Heritage Lottery Fund and various trusts and foundations. Of course, there's still plenty more to do and donations are always gratefully received (£5 million is needed). For £5 you can buy a roof tile (there are 37,000), which is a great gift to make to a place that's clearly raised its roof many times for the good of its music and arts loving community.

Left: Nobukazu Takemura, appearing in February

For further information on Union Chapel (concerts, projects, hiring the space, or fundraising), visit www.unionchapel.org.uk, or call 020 7226 3750. Union Chapel is situated in Compton Terrace off Upper Street N1 (near Highbury and Islington roundabout).

Nobukazu Takemura featuring Aki Tsuyuko and Child's View Band perform at Union Chapel on Saturday 7 February 2004. Tickets cost £14 (£10 conc) from Stargreen 020 7734 8932 or from Union Chapel website, details as above.