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Discord Over SummerStage

The Central Park SummerStage has closed down for the season, but the controversy it has generated continues to reverberate.

At issue is the sound of SummerStage, or more specifically, how much of it should be heard from the brownstones and apartment buildings on Fifth and Madison Avenues and the side streets in between.

No one — not the neighborhood people, not parks officials — disputed that a new sound system installed in 1992 caused a noise problem. And so this year, the two sides tried to cut an agreement on what could be called the closed-window standard: the music would not be intrusive in apartments with their windows closed.

Now, though, the battle for the local airspace has escalated, with the residents demanding that the volume be reduced to a level that would not be intrusive with their windows open.

"The question is, When does noise become a nuisance?" asked Henry J. Stern, a former Parks Commissioner who is now president of the Citizens Union, a civic group. What must be done, he added, is to reach "that delicate balance between the neighbors' rights to peace and quiet and the public's right to music."

The SummerStage series of free concerts and other performing arts started in 1986 at Central Park's old band shell, mid-park at 72d Street. When that was closed for renovations in 1990, the series moved to Rumsey

Playfield, toward the east side of the park. Then: the new sound system.

The noise was "horrendous," said Brian Rom, a leader of the Park East Coalition, which was formed to deal with the issue.

Receiving so many complaints — 15 to 20 per weekend — last year, Betsy Gotbaum, the Parks Commissioner, hired sound consultants to work out solutions, at a cost of more than \$10,000. Erica Ruben, producer of SummerStage, said the length of shows was reduced to three to three-and-a-half hours (no more all-day megashows); the maximum sound level was cut from about 115 decibels last year to 102 decibels, with an average level of 98 decibels (the closed-window standard). That is roughly the equivalent of traffic on a busy city street, by the time it reaches the windows. And a complaints hotline was established.

"Now the music is inaudible with the windows closed and barely audible with them open, but it's apparently not enough," Ms. Ruben said, even though the audience complained the that the sound was too low.

But the local Councilman, Andrew Eristoff, said people were still disturbed by the noise. "Maybe," he said, "the site for SummerStage is not appropriate and we should look at an alternative."

Another round of meetings will begin in a few weeks.

MARVINE HOWE



Jack Vartoogian

Don Byron Klezmer Band playing the Central Park SummerStage.