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Worcester Chamber Music Society celebrates first 10 years

On Sept. 30, 2006, a new classical musical group, the Worcester Chamber Music Society, gave its first performance in a basement performing space at St. Paul's Cathedral in Worcester.

The ensemble wasn't really starting from the bottom up since several of the musicians were well-known and all had excellent musical credentials. But how well would a new chamber music ensemble of professional musicians do in these parts? Granted, the Worcester Music Festival brings in chamber recitals by internationally renowned performers, but outside of the area's colleges, there had not been much in the way of local chamber groups.

Still, the 2006 Sept. 30 program included J.S. Bach's Brandenburg Concerto, always a treat and an enticement. And the concert drew an audience of 300 people - an "overflow" crowd in fact. The Worcester Telegram & Gazette reviewer noted that there was "anticipatory electricity" in the air. Something was about to catch on.

On Sept. 19 in Tuckerman Hall there will be pre-concert celebration starting at 6:45 p.m. and glasses will be raised in the air. "We plan on toasting the audience and toasting the new season," said WCMS co-founder, executive director and flutist Tracy Kraus.

The Worcester Chamber Music Society's 10th anniversary season, that is. The first concert of the season (the program was also performed Sept. 17 in Unitarian Universalist Church, Harvard), titled "Birthday Bash," will include works by Brahms, Prokofiev and Shostakovich.

Co-founder Peter Sulski, violist and violinist, said the initial idea was "just that there should be a chamber music group playing music in this town." The first season consisted of four performances. "It was basically just concerts and that was enough," Sulski said.

The 10th anniversary season includes "Main Stage" concerts, such as the Tuckerman Hall "Birthday Bash"; a "Cafe Concert" series with dinner followed by performance at Nuovo Restaurant, 92 Shrewsbury St., Worcester; an annual free family concert (at Mechanics Hall) and annual free senior concert; a "Music on Main" community concert series in Main South; special presentations; "Very Open Rehearsals"; and a summer concert series at Clark University. One Main Stage concert this season (April 15 in Unitarian Universalist Church, Harvard, and April 17 in Mechanics Hall) is in collaboration with Music Worcester Inc., which puts on the Worcester Music Festival.

Meanwhile, WCMS's "Neighborhood Strings" program provides free music lessons in violin, viola and cello to youth from the Main South neighborhood and fosters family involvement. An innovative classical chamber music summer camp for strings, woodwinds and pianists ages 12 through adult endeavors to create a non-competitive atmosphere that nurtures talents of all levels through a combination of coaching, workshops and concerts.

"I had no idea it would grow into the organization it is today," said Kraus.

The chamber group's core members consist of musicians who live locally but have international résumés: Mark Berger (resident composer/violist); Krista Buckland Reisner (general manager and violinist); Ariana Falk (education director, cellist); Maria Ferrante (soprano); Joshua Gordon (cello); Rohan Gregory (violin); Kraus; William Ness (piano and organist); David Russell (cello); and Sulski. There has been some turnover, but Berger, Ferrante, Kraus, Ness and Sulski have been together since the ensemble was formed. Guest artists are also regularly featured at concerts. Joining WCMS for the birthday bash concert are Julian Mills (clarinet) and Sonya Ovrutsky Fensome (piano).

Sulski was born and raised in Worcester but moved abroad and was a viola and violin player with the London Symphony Orchestra for seven years. Returning to this area, he started talking with "like-minded people," including Kraus, about forming a chamber ensemble. In 2006 the decision was made "to go for it."

"At that time there was a void," Kraus said.

The decision to put Worcester in the group's name was deliberate, Sulski said, indicating a commitment to the community. "I think it's the right thing to do. It's not all about numbers, it's about depth of impact," he said.

Sulski was WCMS's artistic director at the outset, but now the group makes collaborative artistic decisions, meeting three times a year to discuss programming. The 2015-16 season is typically wide-ranging, from Baroque to contemporary, and themed ("Feminine Mystique," "Madness In Reason"...).

Meanwhile, members started assuming roles that included the business as well as the artistic and educational facets of running the ensemble.

"We're pretty unique in that the players are doing all this work," said Sulski, who is active with Neighborhood Strings.

The diversified programming represents "offerings to meet today's audiences and hopefully tomorrow's audiences," said general manager Reisner, who joined the ensemble as a guest artist in its second year and became a permanent member a year later.



Members of the Worcester Chamber Music Ensemble (L-R) Peter Sulski, Ariana Falk, Tracy Kraus and Krista Buckland Reisner, on the stage at Tuckerman Hall. Chris Christo photo

Kraus said that attendance for the Main Stage concerts is "good but hasn't risen over the last two years. But overall attendance has increased. The Cafe Series concerts have been selling out." Last season's free family concert drew more than 1,000 people, she said.

Programs like Neighborhood Strings "give us a chance to work with people in different ways," said education director Falk, who has been with WCMS four years. Twenty-six youths participated last season. "It's been a wonderful way for us as players to connect with our community and make a deep impact on kids," she said.

"I think we're paying forward," Reisner said.

Looking forward, "I do think we will be here in 10 years," Kraus said. "I do think Neighborhood Strings will be larger. We've talked about having a storefront space in Main South."

Sulski, half-jokingly, said, "We've talked about founder's syndrome as we become less young as opposed to more old." More seriously, "We have to be honest thinking that through. This is bigger than any of us."

The season opener Sept. 19 is also "The Thomas H. Keil Memorial Concert," honoring Mr. Keil, an educator and musician who passed away in 2013. Mr. Keil was a physics professor at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, a keen supporter of music and musical groups (including the Worcester Chamber Music Society) and an enthusiastic cellist.

Worcester Chamber Music Society When: 8 p.m. Sept. 19 Where: Tuckerman Hall, corner of Tuckerman and Salisbury streets, Worcester How much: Tickets: \$35; seniors \$30; students \$12; youth under 17 free. Pre-concert celebration 6:45 p.m. \$30. www.worcesterchambermusic.org

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