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Worcester Chamber Music Society at the Willows

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By Jonathan Blumhofer
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Next week marks the start of the typically busy summer season of the acclaimed Worcester Chamber Music Society as it gives its third annual free concert for seniors at The Willows of Worcester. The June 7 program, consisting of what executive director Tracy Kraus calls a “summary [of] the concerts we performed this season,” features the piano quartet of Gabriel Fauré alongside Antonín Dvořák’s “String Quintet in E-flat.” Musicians performing in the concert include violinist Krista Buckland Reisner, violist (and Worcester native) Peter Sulski, and pianist Ian Watson.

For the Worcester Chamber Music Society, which was founded in 2006, these free concerts are integral to the ensemble’s mission. As Kraus says, “Our community and educational outreach are an essential part of what we do. In addition to free concerts, each season we visit schools in the area where we perform and talk about the process of making music together. This past season, we were in residence at the Burncoat Fine Arts Magnet Program, where we worked closely with the high school music students; the Abby Kelly Foster School; Hardwick Elementary School; and Shrewsbury Middle School.”

While many arts organizations (including the Boston Symphony Orchestra) have in recent years cut outreach and education efforts owing to the difficult economic climate, the Worcester Chamber Music Society has no plans to do so. “Developing new audiences for classical music is a challenge for all classical music ensembles these days,” Ms. Kraus admits, but “accessibility is key. We have developed several strategies, some more successful than others. Through our relationship with the students at Burncoat and our free family concerts, we have seen a significant increase in student attendance (and tickets for children under 17 are free). It’s all about developing relationships.”

And these relationships are bearing fruit. Last season, the music society’s free family concert at Mechanics Hall attracted an audience of more than 500 people, many of whom, Kraus notes, had never before attended a classical music concert.

Following its June performance, the music society heads to Anna Maria College for its annual

Summer Festival, which runs the month of July. The Summer Festival features both a chamber music summer camp for musicians of all ages and levels of ability, and a series of four faculty concerts at Anna Maria's Miriam Hall. This year's concerts showcase an appealingly wide range of repertoire, stretching from J.S. Bach to the contemporary British composer Jonathan Harvey, with a special focus on the music of Brahms.

Then, after a short break in August, it's on to season seven. "We have five programs lined up" for next season, Kraus announces, while pointing out that, in addition to the Main Stage concerts, the music society will be continuing its informal Café Series (at The People's Kitchen Restaurant in Worcester) and have three Very Open Rehearsals in local homes (slated for November, January, and April). Highlights for season seven include a concert called "Impressions" in November (featuring pieces by François Couperin, Claude Debussy, Toru Takemitsu, and Maurice Ravel) and "The White House Concert and Beyond" (in conjunction with the Worcester Art Museum's "Kennedy to Kent State" exhibit) in January.

But that's all looking rather far off into the future. For now, the focus is on Thursday's concert and remembering one of the prime reasons why the Worcester Chamber Music Society makes music to begin with. "Reaching out to underserved areas of our community is an important part of the WCMS mission," Ms. Kraus emphasizes. It's a big part, to be sure, but one that Ms. Kraus and her colleagues do particularly well.

The Worcester Chamber Music Society's third-annual seniors concert is held at The Willows of Worcester at 7:30 p.m. on June 7. The concert is free, but reservations are required. Call 978-456-2730 to reserve your seats. Visit worcesterchambermusic.org for more information.