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An ensemble of friends Chamber music society part of 'cultural tapestry'

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Going to a Worcester Chamber Music Society concert could almost be like having the ensemble in your own ... chamber.

Chamber music is usually defined as classical music written for a small group of instruments that could play in the intimacy of a palace chamber (European royalty were the early sponsors of performances).

To actually have such a place under your own roof would be very high society — if also highly unlikely.

But the Worcester Chamber Music Society has the right spirit. The original intimate setting meant that musicians and audience alike were most likely good companions, or at least on good terms with each other.

Worcester Chamber Music Society members see themselves, and their audience, as friends.

"We like each other, and we like our audiences. We know a lot of people out there. There's a lot of collegiality and friendship," said harpsichordist and pianist Ian Watson.

"These are our friends," said violinist Krista Buckland Reisner. "What I think — we don't just have really great players, we're friends and it absolutely translates to people. I think they feel that they have ownership."

Watson added, "It's an extension of the chamber music idea — of making music with your friends in your living room."

Actually, the society does play music in living rooms, but more about that later.

The good music and good vibrations may help explain why the society is entering its fifth season with its largest schedule of concerts and performances yet.

"The Russian Spirit," a program featuring works by Russian composers Schnittke, Rachmaninoff, Tcherpnin and Tchaikovsky, begins the 2010-11 season with performances in Worcester and Leominster. There will be six other programs — most of which will be performed twice — as well as a free senior concert to end the season. The society is also active in the summer, having just concluded its Summer Festival at Anna Maria College — an educational "camp" along with four concerts.

When the society was founded in 2006, its initial season consisted of four concerts. Right away, however, the auguries seemed hopeful. At the first concert, attendance was beyond expectations so that "we were pulling out extra chairs," said Tracy Kraus, flautist and executive director.

Peter Sulski, violin/viola and artistic director, may have got matters off on the right foot by deliberately emphasizing the name: Worcester Chamber Music Society. While Worcester has seen many great chamber performances over the years, the word Worcester in front of an ensemble had hitherto been missing.

"It puts Worcester at the forefront," Sulski said.

Furthermore, the Worcester area was starving for a chamber ensemble of its own. "There was a void when we first started," Kraus observed.

The founding members knew each other and also had a following in the local area and beyond. "These are world-class musicians," Sulski said of the group.

For example, Watson, music director of the Cathedral of St. Paul in Worcester and artistic director of the Arcadia Players, is an English native who is an internationally acclaimed pianist/organist/harpsichordist. Maria Ferrante is one of the most sought-after sopranos in New England. Sulski, a Worcester native, was a member of the London Symphony Orchestra for seven years before returning stateside.

"There was anticipatory electricity in the air concerning the debut of the Worcester Chamber Music Society," wrote Telegram & Gazette music critic John Zeugner in his review of the first concert. "Nine local A-list musicians with world-class credentials more

than fulfilled that anticipation in a uniquely crafted concert ...”

The group is comprised of Sulski, Kraus, Reisner (who is also the Summer Festival director), Watson, Ferrante, Amy Rawstron (violin), Rohan Gregory (violin), Mark Berger (violin/viola/composer), David Russell (cello) and William Ness (piano).

But anyone with some familiarity with the Worcester arts scene will know that it is one thing to get off to a nice start, and quite another to sustain enthusiasm and support. Since we’re talking about classical music — chamber music, no less — the odds of survival might have been regarded by some people as particularly slim.

But the group has grown. Recently it officially became a nonprofit, meaning it can enjoy benefits such as being tax-exempt and eligible to receive funds that are tax-exempt.

Back in June, Kraus, Watson and Reisner were being interviewed after a rehearsal at First Baptist Church. The next day they would perform a free concert at Briarwood Community Center in Worcester.

“We’ve tried to reach out to as many of the senior audience as we could. The response has been good,” Kraus said.

From the start, the Worcester Chamber Music Society made the commitment to be a presence in the community. And their community is not just Worcester. Its educational outreach program takes concerts and workshops to public and private schools throughout Worcester County. Over the years, the society has also endeavored to keep ticket prices reasonable, and several concerts during the year are free.

Meanwhile, the ensemble’s “Very Open Rehearsal” program really does allow you to bring the orchestra home and play in your chamber ... or room. The program has gone in to private homes with invited guests (proceeds get earmarked for educational outreach), and the musicians rehearse and discuss an upcoming program right in front of them.

“It’s an interactive rehearsal,” Watson said. Afterward, there will be a meet-and-greet and everyone will have dinner together.

“It helps grow our audiences and draw our audiences closer to us,” Kraus said.

Worcester Chamber Music Society 2010-11 Season

•“The Russian Spirit” — 7:30 p.m. Sept. 25, Gordon Hall, First Baptist Church, 111 Park Ave., Worcester; 3 p.m. Sept. 26, First Church Unitarian Universalist, 15 West St., Leominster

•“Beethoven Revisited” — 7:30 p.m. Oct. 23, Chapel of the Holy Spirit, Assumption College, Worcester

•“French Connection” — 7:30 p.m. Nov. 20, First Unitarian Church, 90 Main St., Worcester; 3 p.m. Nov. 21, Village Congregational Church, 25 Church St., Whitinsville

•“Songs of Innocence and Experience” — 7:30 p.m. Jan. 8, First Baptist Church, Worcester; 3 p.m. Jan. 9, Village Congregational Church, Whitinsville

•“Baroque Concert” — 7:30 p.m. Feb. 12, Unitarian Universalist Church, 9 Ayer Road, Harvard; 3 p.m. Feb. 13, Worcester Art Museum, 55 Salisbury St., Worcester

•“Family Concert: ‘Pinocchio’s Adventures in Funland’ ” — 3 p.m. March 6, Mechanics Hall, 321 Main St., Worcester; 3 p.m. March 20, Cultural Center at Eagle Hill, Hardwick

•“The Bohemians” — 7:30 p.m. April 9, Chapel of the Holy Spirit, Assumption College, Worcester; 3 p.m. April 10, Oakham Congregational Church, 6 Coldbrook Road, Oakham

•“Free Senior Concert” — June 14, Briarwood Community Center, Worcester

For more information, visit www.worcesterchambermusic.org

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