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The Worcester Chamber Music Society

By Bernard Whitmore

One of the highpoints of my college education was a music class taught by a tyrannical professor infamous for his use of the Socratic Method on huge entry-level classes. As an awkward freshman, it was a painfully vulnerable experience for me. But when he played a recording of Anton Webern's Sting Trio I knew my universe had just shifted to something truly wonderful.

This forever burned into my soul a place for classical and, in particular, the intimacy of chamber music. I recently had the opportunity to talk with the directors of the Worcester Chamber Music Society ~ little did they know the struggle I had in limiting my questions to one hour.

The Worcester Chamber Music Society is a relatively new addition to the area's cultural mix. Please tell me about how it started. What formed the nucleus of the group?

Tracy Kraus (Executive Director & viola): Peter and I are on the faculty at Clark University; for a couple years we'd pass each other in the halls and say, 'Maybe we should start something.' Just chitchat at first, but then we played a concert together and afterwards at the reception, Peter said, 'OK, it's time to make this happen.' This was five years ago.

Pete Sulski (Artistic Director & flute): 'With chamber music you can't mess around ~ you've got to have great colleagues. It's not like an orchestra which can absorb different levels and then, with great leadership, can sound fantastic.

I was playing string quartets with the String Players; but we also had Ian [Watson, harpsichord] in town doing fantastic things; his keyboard skills and experience are incredible. And we knew Maria [Ferrante, soprano] was around and interested in doing something. So just having these

amazing personalities who had their own fan bases, so to speak, we knew it was the right time.

Tracy: So the synergy was there, the stars were aligned and we took off... like a rocket! We didn't realize the vacuum that was here, we knew there wasn't much going on at the time but at our first concert we had 250 people, which is huge for chamber music; usually you expect thirty to fifty! We didn't expect the turnout and it's been that way ever since. We did it with fabulous musicians and quality right out of the gate.

What's your primary mission?

Tracy: Our primary mission is to bring high quality chamber music to this community and to make it accessible and affordable. Underscoring this, Peter added, "We want to get away from the old, 'We will now deign to play for you' attitude that has long intimidated classical music audiences."

When I asked if there were a particular genre or composer of chamber music that the group favored, Peter explained that with their tremendous breadth of talent the group is able to assemble diverse programs that include well-known favorites combined with new and less-heard pieces. Tracy added, "Audience members have thanked us for this. They've told us, 'We would never have heard this if you had not brought it to us.'"

Well-earned audience trust may, in part, have led to something Tracy shared with me. "This year we're rolling out a new fundraising idea to involve audiences in the selection of the music that we play: a silent auction where the highest bidder will get to choose a piece that we play in a upcoming concert." I immediately began to consider the many permutations of such a concept. Sensing this, she added, "We're still working out all the details, but when we discussed it at a pre-concert talk people's eyes grew wide with interest."

"Everyone likes control," Peter added.

In scanning the Society's 2009-2009 series brochure, I noticed that most of their events will be held in churches and asked them why:

Tracy: We started out by choosing churches for several reasons: For the intimate space. Even in larger cathedrals like All Saints we move the pews to create an intimate space in a cathedral setting. Also, there's the built-in audience of the congregation. This was a huge opportunity for us, especially in the first year when we didn't have money for publicity and

marketing. It proved hugely successful.

When we ask ourselves if there's another space that's not in a church we come back to the thought that we don't want our venues to be too big because we don't want our audiences bigger than three hundred and fifty – this is no longer intimate.

We did outgrow the Museum of Russian Icons in Clinton – a fabulous space – but there was only seating for one hundred. We had standing room only and people were leaning against the walls, too near the icons!

Chamber ensembles strike me as tightly formed cohesive groups. What are the relationships of the musicians of the Worcester Chamber Music Society?

Peter: The personalities are so distinct; we come from such different backgrounds. But when you have musicians of a certain quality, they're thinking outside themselves as opposed to their own little bit. It's people's intense interest in each other that that makes us 'sparky.'

Tracy continued: Right, we have divas in the group ~ but we don't have egos... at least when we're together!

www.worcesterchambermusic.org