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Tuesday, September 16, 2014

Worcester Chamber Music Society kicks off ninth season

LIVING

By Richard Duckett TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

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The Worcester Chamber Music Society opens its 2014-15 season with a program titled "Wunderkind!" The German word for "prodigy" will certainly be applicable to the three composers being featured — Mozart, Mendelssohn and Alexander Glazunov ("the Russian Brahms"), all of whom were precocious young talents.

But with the concerts Sept. 18 (in Grafton Congregational Church) and Sept. 20 (in First Baptist Church, Worcester), the Worcester Chamber Music Society will be showing its maturity.

This is the group's ninth season. "I think we've all grown as musicians. We can all learn from each other — I think that's what keeps us together," said Tracy Kraus, WCMS executive director.

Meanwhile, Kraus feels the group has become well established in the community — or society — at-large. "We certainly are getting more recognition community-wide," Kraus said.

WCMS's stated goals include bringing "world-class chamber music" to Greater Worcester venues and nurturing the community through "a unique combination of affordable concerts, education and community engagement."

For season nine, WCMS will present 16 concerts (its initial season consisted of four) of chamber gems as well as rarely performed works in a number of different settings in Worcester and Worcester County. The "Main Stage Series" includes, besides "Wunderkind!," "Water Games," "Mozart Fest" and "Bach and Beyond." The popular annual free family concert will be back (this time "The Emperor's New Clothes" March 1 in Mechanics Hall), and two special presentations will be in conjunction with Old Sturbridge Village and Clark University. "Café Concerts" (two at Nuovo Restaurant and one at Eric's La Patisserie, both in Worcester) and "Very Open Rehearsals" are also returning,



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and the "Neighborhood Strings" program enters its third year of free music lessons in violin, viola and cello to youth from the Main South neighborhood.

"We're really looking forward to it," Kraus said of the new season. "Each concert will be unique."

The chamber group's core members consist of musicians who live locally but have international reputations: Mark Berger (resident composer/violinist); Krista Buckland Reisner (general manager, violin), Ariana Falk (education director, cellist); Maria Ferrante (soprano); Joshua Gordon (cello); Rohan Gregory (violin); Kraus (flute); William Ness (piano and organist); David Russell (cello); and Peter Sulski (violin, viola).

There has been some turnover, but most of the members have been together since the ensemble was formed. Choosing "Worcester" in the title of the ensemble was a deliberate statement, Sulski noted at the group's formation.

For the ninth season there have been a couple of changes to the administrative structure, but they reflect what has always been actually happening at WCMS, Kraus said.

Sulski had formally been WCMS's artistic director, but is stepping down from that title role. Besides performing, he will assist with running Neighborhood Strings. A programming committee organized by Buckland Reisner but open to all the group's performers will deliberate and decide what music will be performed. The first meeting this season is Sept. 19. "It's how we've done it all along anyway," Kraus said. "We've always been a collaborative organization of artists. This year we're structurally moving toward that model."

Some artistic collaborations have been known to have artistic disagreements, but Kraus said, "We've been able to reach a consensus every year."

The consensus on the eighth season would appear to be that 2013-14 was a success.

"Attendance has been up across the board," Kraus said. In particular, the annual family concert saw attendance rise from 600 to 1,000 people. A collaboration with Music Worcester that brought in guest pianist Randall Hodgkinson also drew well and the two groups are likely to work together again in the future. All three of WCMS's "Café Concerts" were sold out.

Neighborhood Strings has around 20 young students from about 8 to 13 or 14 years old, and the program hopes to add five more this fall. "The kids are doing very well," Kraus said, and the program has high attendance and retention rates. The program has only lost two students, and that was because their families moved, she said.

"We've had a tremendous amount of support from Clark University," and nine Clark students have been serving as mentors to the children, she said. Another youth-oriented program, the annual summer camp, has also been growing.

WCMS will be bringing in some more prominent guests artists for its concerts this season, beginning with violist Marcus Thompson for "Wunderkind!"

"Wunderkind!" will be performed at 7:30 p.m. Sept. 18 in Grafton Congregational Church, 30 Grafton Common, Grafton; and 7:30 p.m. Sept. 20 at First Baptist Church, 111 Park Ave., Worcester. (Tickets are \$32; \$27 seniors; \$10 students; children under 17 free).

The season opener 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.

There have been some concerns expressed nationally that enthusiasm for and interest in chamber music classical concerts is on the wane, but Kraus does not see that locally.

"I would disagree. I think our chamber music audiences are growing. We know for a fact when we get them in the door they come back," Kraus said.

Chamber music concerts being smaller and in more intimate settings than many orchestral performances can bring the musicians and the audience closer together on several levels. "We really make connections," Kraus said.

She also noted the recent emergence of several young and popular chamber groups such as the Boston-based A Far Cry, which performed at the Worcester Music Festival last season.

"There are a number of new young chamber groups doing some really exciting things," she said.

(SUBMITTED PHOTO)

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'Wunderkind!'

When: 7:30 p.m. Sept. 18 in Grafton Congregational Church, 30 Grafton Common, Grafton; and 7:30 p.m. Sept. 20 at First Baptist Church, 111 Park Ave., Worcester.

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Wunderkinds, you could say — just like the still young Worcester Chamber Music Society.

"In our area, the tide has turned," Kraus said.

For complete information about the Worcester Chamber Music Society and its new season, visit www.worcesterchambermusic.org.

Contact Richard Duckett at Richard.Duckett@telegram.com

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