

Collaboration the key as Worcester Chamber Music Society begins 12th season

By Richard Duckett

Telegram & Gazette Staff

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WORCESTER — Democracy in society is a good thing.

In the Worcester Chamber Music Society, for example, it promotes harmony.

“Every musician has a voice at the meetings, and every voice is equal,” said Tracy Kraus, Worcester Chamber Music Society’s co-founder, executive director and flutist, about the nine-musician group’s collaborative approach.

“And ultimately it shows at our performances. It creates an even deeper bond among the musicians. I know we feel it, and I know our audiences feel it,” Kraus said.

In the fall, WCMS will hold the first of three meetings to discuss and ultimately choose its 2018-19 and 13th season.

But first things first.

WCMS’s 12th season will get underway at 7:30 p.m. Sept. 23 in Mechanics Hall, 321 Main St., with a free concert titled “Joys and Sorrows” featuring Schubert’s Piano Quintet in A Major (“The Trout”), and Mahler’s Symphony No. 4 arranged for chamber ensemble. (Admission is free but reservations are required. To reserve, visit).

There are some other collaborative aspects to the performance. The season opener is also the annual Thomas H. Keil Memorial Concert honoring Mr. Keil, an educator and musician who died in 2013. The concerts have been sponsored by Mr. Keil’s widow, Nora Keil. This year, Nora Keil wanted to mark her 75th birthday by sponsoring a free concert in Mechanics Hall. Schubert’s bright and playful Trout Quintet is one of her favorite chamber music pieces. “This is her gift to the community,” Kraus said of the concert.

For its part, WCMS chose Mahler’s 4th, a beautiful work of contrasting emotions culminating with a soprano voice giving a child’s vision of heaven.

“We’ve wanted to do it for a long time,” Kraus said. “It’s my favorite Mahler.” But it’s not one that WCMS can perform without guest musicians, and 10 will be joining for the concert, including conductor Donald Palma and soprano Kendra Colton.

Palma is conductor of the New England Conservatory of Music Chamber Orchestra, along with many other affiliations.

“He’s a phenomenal conductor. We felt with the size of the ensemble and the complexities of Mahler we would be able to put our best foot forward with a conductor,” Kraus said.

“At the same time we are a chamber orchestra so it will be a collaborative process,” she added.

The Worcester Chamber Music Society gave its first performance in a basement performing space at St. Paul’s Cathedral in Worcester on Sept. 30, 2006.

“It’s hard to believe we’ve been doing it that long,” Kraus said.

The members, all acknowledged to be excellent musicians in their own right, are Kraus, Randall Hodgkinson (piano), Mark Berger (resident composer/violist), Krista Buckland Reisner (violin), Ariana Falk (education director, cellist), Joshua Gordon (cello), Rohan Gregory (violin), David Russell (cello) and Peter Sulski (viola/violin). There has been some turnover over the course of 12 years, but Berger, Kraus and Sulski have been together since the ensemble was formed. Guest artists are also regularly featured at concerts.

WCMS’s goals were defined at the beginning.

“Our mission is to serve the Worcester community. We are mission-driven so anything we do will fall in line with that model,” Kraus said.

WCMS has gradually developed an array of programming in a variety of settings.

“Main Stage” concerts for the 2017-18 season will include “On Fire” (works by Ginastera, Harbison and Mendelssohn) Nov. 3 in Grafton Congregational Church and Nov. 4 in the Joseph & Jordan Shapiro Concert Hall at Joy of Music in Worcester. A program marking the 100th anniversary of the death of Claude Debussy will be performed April 12 at Harvard Unitarian Church and April 14 at Shapiro Hall.

Shapiro Hall was dedicated last year. “It’s Worcester’s newest acoustic gem,” Kraus said. “It’s a wonderful chamber venue.”

“A Bach Baroque Christmas” has become a popular holiday concert at Old Sturbridge Village and will return there for a third year Dec. 1 and also be put on in Worcester for the first time Nov. 30 at the Worcester Historical Museum.

The “Cafe Concert” series with brunch or dinner followed by performances at Nuovo Restaurant, 92 Shrewsbury St., has been selling out for the past four years, Kraus said. “The owners (Alex and Loreta Gjonca) are classical music fans,” Kraus said. “They make it very easy to work there.” The “Very Open Rehearsal” series, held at private homes, similarly maxes out in attendance.

WCMS puts on an annual free family community concert - this season “Peter and the Wolf” March 4, 2018, in Mechanics Hall. “Music On Main” is focused on Main South, and there will be a collaboration with Crocodile River Music beginning with a free performance Nov. 17 in Tilton Hall at Clark University. Clark is also the venue for WCMS’s summer “Chamberfest Music Camp” for musicians 12 to adult and its “Summer Concert Series.”

Meanwhile, “Neighborhood Strings” is a program that provides free music lessons to youth from Main South while fostering family involvement. There will be 50 students ages 6-15 this fall. “We have a very high retention,” Kraus said. “Kids played at 11 different events last year.” “Neighborhood Strings” recently received the 2017 Arts|Learning “Outstanding Community Arts Education Collaborative — Music” award.

“Our Neighborhood Strings program has brought visibility to the city in a way that’s unique,” Kraus said.

With all this going on, “we’re not looking to add new programs — we have a lot on our plate. We are always looking to deepen our programs,” Kraus said. “We’re looking to build on our various programs, tweak things and keep them fresh.”

For nearly two years, WCMS has been located at visible storefront offices at 323 Main St. right next to Mechanics Hall with Music Worcester Inc. on one side and, in a recent move, Worcester Youth Orchestras on the other.

“The mailman gets confused,” Kraus said.

The visibility extends to the Worcester cultural scene in general, where Kraus says she sees WCMS as a significant collaborative presence.

“I think first of all I have to thank our friends next door (Music Worcester) for transforming their season and bringing top-notch musicians to the city. I think the audiences for chamber music have grown. We’ve seen our audiences grow. It’s important for organizations to take their audiences and diversify, as Music Worcester has done, as we have done,” Kraus said.

“I think what’s going on culturally in Worcester — it’s just a really exciting time to be part of the cultural scene in Worcester. I think we are a major player in Worcester. We feel that we are equal partners with all of the major cultural institutions.”

For more information, visit

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