

Entertainment & Life

## Worcester Chamber Music Society thinks smaller for next season in wake of virus

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WORCESTER — This would usually be the time of year when the Worcester Chamber Music Society is getting ready to announce its new season, observed WCMS co-founder, executive director and flutist Tracy Kraus.

Typical recent seasons have had about 15 to 16 concerts across the musician-led classical chamber music ensemble's array of programming in a variety of settings, including its Main Stage Series, Music on Main concerts at the Worcester PopUp, the annual WCMS family concert (which was held this year at The Hanover Theatre and Conservatory for the Performing Arts), Café Concerts and Summer Concert Series.

However, the 2020-21 season, WCMS' 15th, is likely to look a little different.

"I think we'll be able to offer some semblance of a season," Kraus said. "I think we're looking at four or five next year."

No decisions have been made yet as WCMS is considering what will happen to the remainder of its 14th season. WCMS has canceled or postponed most of its spring concerts, and is pondering what to do with its summer Chamberfest Music camp and Summer Concert Season.

The Main Stage concert "Elegy," featuring works by Schubert and Beethoven, which had been scheduled for April 17 at the Fitchburg Art Museum and April 19 at Curtis Performance Hall at Assumption College, has been rescheduled, to July 16 at Razzo Hall at Clark University and July 17 at FAM. "Hopefully that will be the start of our summer concerts," Kraus said.

Meanwhile, WCMS' free inner-city youth strings program, Neighborhood Strings, continues to do well with more than 75% of participants switching to online with their teachers, Kraus said.

"We're having some fun engaging with the kids. They seem to enjoy it. It's really great to stay connected with that particular community," Kraus said.

WCMS was founded in 2006 expressly to be part of the Worcester community, and Kraus said, "We really want to thank our community leaders" for their role in leading Worcester during the coronavirus pandemic. "It really is extraordinary."

For a small professional group that's used to doing a lot of programming in Worcester and Worcester County, WCMS has to plan its next moves carefully as the crisis continues.


"We're taking one step at a time. We're looking at budget projections and how we're going to move forward," Kraus said. On the other hand, "it seems like the pavement changes every time we take a step forward."

The 14th season had begun with a new WCMS logo and slogan, "Be Engaged." Performances were well-received and some concerts, particularly the Café Concerts, were selling out.

"We were in a good position for a small financial organization. We did have savings that we could dip into," Kraus said.

With that, "we don't have an endowment to speak of."

WCMS gets about 30% of its revenue from individual donations, 30% from earned income (including ticket sales and advertising), 24% from foundations, 10% from government grants and 4.5% from corporate support. There are seven people on the payroll (Kraus is the only full-time employee) and others are freelance.



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The budget is \$392,000, most of which is for the Neighborhood Strings program. “That’s fully funded,” Kraus said of the program. And in the future, “I think we can make it (Neighborhood Strings) work.”

Still, not too long ago, WCMS thought it would be taking a hit for the year in the region of \$10,000. Now it looks like \$45,000, Kraus said. “For an organization our size, that’s a big hit.”

WCMS does not get grant funds for its concerts, “so if they don’t give, we don’t get hurt ... I used to be upset by that, but now I guess there’s a silver lining,” Kraus said.

But a likely scenario is that “we’ll get through this if we downsize for a year or two, and we’ll come back.”

Downsizing literally in terms of venue. Most performance groups want to perform in progressively larger spaces to draw more audiences, Kraus said. Now the amount of people who can gather together in one space is severely limited in

Massachusetts as to make live performances impossible. But if the state would ease restrictions in a few weeks from 25 to 100 people, that would be another matter.

“The beauty of chamber music is that we perform in an intimate space,” Kraus said. “If the state decides 100, we’ll be able to do that. There are ways we can work around this to make sure patrons are safe. That’s what we’re thinking about for next season — how do we limit our audiences in a way that will feel sustainable but will stay safe.” But in the changing landscape, final decisions are on hold. “I don’t want to rush to do that,” Kraus said.

A step-by-step approach by musical organizations generally is very hard for musicians who live note-to-note.

“Musicians are part of the gig economy and they’ve lost all their work,” Kraus said, except perhaps for some who are still teaching.

As a flutist and performing musician herself, “it’s hard,” Kraus said. “I think we’re going out of our minds. I think we all are, not just musicians. But it’s what we’re trained to do.” Kraus has been getting “back to basics and practice and practice. Things we’ve never had time to do. Some of our musicians have been getting back to composing.”

However, “some musicians are not managing it very well. Not in our group, but I know some musicians who are really depressed. I know some musicians who are talking about signing up for UPS because concerts are not going to come back quickly. Concerts in larger spaces — that’s what people are worried about. Maybe by this time next year there will be a vaccine, or some other treatment.”

The current WCMS members, all acknowledged to be excellent musicians in their own right, are Kraus, Randall Hodgkinson (piano), Mark Berger (viola), Krista Buckland Reisner (violin), Ariana Falk (cello), Joshua Gordon (cello), Rohan Gregory (violin), David Russell (cello) and Peter Sulski (viola). Guest artists are also regularly featured at concerts.

WCMS has created an online video blog [@Home With WCMS](https://www.worcesterchambermusic.org) on its website [www.worcesterchambermusic.org](http://www.worcesterchambermusic.org).

Performers will be sharing chat, even recipes, Kraus said. There will also be videos of live performances. A virtual chamber music livestream with multiple performers would be too difficult to orchestrate technically.

But Kraus said individual members are planning solo livestreams “in their living rooms, kitchens.”