

Chamber Music Society of Louisville A History of the last 75 Years

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE 1988 GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY SALUTE:

The Introduction to the souvenir book titled “Golden Anniversary Salute” contained the following interesting information: After an absence from Louisville during the World War II years, Rochester-born Emilie Smith and her husband, Macauley Smith, returned to his native city in 1945 and attended the first post-war concert of the Chamber Music Society. While her husband resumed his law career, Mrs. Smith did volunteer yeoman duty for the Society. She served as president from 1952 to 1964 and has been a frequent trustee and unflagging “den Mother” to visiting artists.

An article titled “Gerhard Herz: ‘Heart’ of the Society” written by longtime Courier-Journal music critic William Mootz contained the following excerpts: Herz worked closely with the late Dwight Anderson when he organized the Society under the sponsorship of the University of Louisville School of Music, which Anderson served as dean. ... Through his guidance [i.e. Herz] (and sometimes at his insistence) the Society’s leaders gradually adopted a policy of offering everything from concerts of ancient music to recitals by famous exponents of the German *lied* as part of the chamber-music experience. ... Herz’s earliest Louisville memories are closely linked to his relationship with Anderson and his novelist wife, Barbara. “We were very close friends. I was constantly invited to their home, and one day, maybe two or three months after my arrival, he called me into his office and said, ‘Sonny, what is missing in Louisville’s concert life?’” ... “So my answer to Dwight’s question was very simple: What’s missing, I told him, is professional chamber music—such as I knew in my native Düsseldorf—and opera.”

But Anderson tackled chamber music first. With Morris Belknap (a prominent local philanthropist and music-lover), he collected enough money to sponsor a modest series of concerts, and the Chamber Music Society was launched on December 14, 1938, with violinist Kathleen Parlow and pianist Gunnar Johansen playing violin sonatas by Brahms, Mozart, and Caesar Franck. The season also included appearances by the Gordon and Coolidge string quartets, and the Heerman Trio. But Anderson needed a stellar attraction to win subscribers to his new concert series, and asked Herz for a recommendation. Herz’s immediate answer was “The Budapest String Quartet,” which he had heard in Germany ... The Budapest almost immediately became an indispensable part of each society season. Beginning in 1943, it returned each year until its members disbanded in 1965.

When Anderson’s increasingly heavy duties as School of Music dean forced him to give up the burden of running the Chamber Music Society, his place was taken in 1946 by Mrs. Macauley Smith and the late Fanny Brandeis. The team turned out, in Mrs. Smith’s words, to be “one of those magic things,” and their chemistry in working together ushered in a two-decade era of almost continuous prosperity. ... Another Herz coup developed in the 1976-77 season, the year when the music world celebrated the sesquicentennial of Beethoven’s death. Herz proposed that the society give over its season to the Juilliard String Quartet, performing a five-concert cycle of the complete Beethoven quartets. ... The resulting concerts not only drew the largest

subscription audience in Chamber Music Society history, but live in memory as performances of unrivaled artistic achievement. . . . But the purpose ever since Dwight Anderson's days, says Herz, "has been that the Chamber Music Society would make no compromises, and always get the best."

"The First Half-Century," an article by Louisville Times music critic F. W. Woolsey, who was also a Board member of the Society, provided these homey remembrances: The audience for this personal, introspective, emotional music may be small, but it is fervent. Performing musicians and visitors in the audience have commented upon the rapt attention Louisville gives its guest artists. . . . It long has been the boast of the Chamber Music Society that, since its inception in 1938, it has brought to listeners the best of the music in this realm of composition played by the best performers it could afford. . . . When in 1938 a little cadre of Louisville music-lovers ventured an initial season of chamber music, they had just \$500 in pledges, and the fees ran to \$1,020. For the 50th anniversary season the artists fees will run to more than \$43,000 . . .

For four decades the faithful in Louisville came by the hundreds to the old Playhouse on the university's Belknap Campus to hear chamber music in an acoustically superior wood building that had once been a chapel. In addition to balky toilets, the Playhouse roof leaked and the heating system in winter clanged like the "Anvil Chorus" in *Il Trovatore*, but many of the great names among chamber music artists—violinists, cellists, violists, pianists, clarinetists and a few singers—made music there. Backstage was grime-encrusted, dimly lighted, and never cleaned. Alexander Schneider, an ebullient violinist who performed with several different groups, used a discarded lipstick to scrawl on a mirror a message to his brother in the Budapest Quartet. The message was in Russian. The mirror stayed unwashed until the Budapest arrived to play months later. In 1980, after a few seasons in other auditoriums, the Society moved to the warmly resonant, comfortable Recital Hall in the new School of Music building on the university campus.

Eventually the board members were persuaded to incorporate the Society, for legal and contractual reasons, but informality continued to mark the affairs of the Society. Mrs. Smith and "Miss Fanny" made their annual seating chart on brown paper, the kind that housewives use on pantry shelves. As a hostess in her farm home, Mrs. Smith made arrangements for a train to stop at rural Tucker's Station so her guests, the New York Piano Quartet, could board this combination freight/passenger train and get to Oak Ridge, Tennessee, for a concert. . . . The distinguished French flutist, Jean-Pierre Rampal, on his first visit to the Smith farm, watched his first baseball game on television, meanwhile pitching a lot of questions about the game at Judge and Mrs. Smith.

The list of those who left the Society better and perhaps stronger for their having been a part of it is a long one, and it has to begin with Dwight Anderson, dean of the university School of Music in the '30s and '40s, who helped shape Louisville's musical profile for years to come. His devotion to chamber music was complete; he even sold tickets in the booth at the Playhouse.

"A Memory of the Playhouse" by the Society's first president and legendary supporter, Emilie S. "Emmy" Smith, continued remembrances of the first venue for the concerts: The University of

Louisville's Ekstrom Library today covers the place where once the Playhouse spread its pleasing roofline. In that venerable white clapboard building, all of our Chamber Music Society concerts—with a few notable exceptions—were held through April 11, 1976. There we enjoyed the special magic emanating from a structure that cast its spell over musicians and audience alike. ... “Next to Sanders Theater at Harvard, the finest acoustics anywhere,” commented Alexander Schneider.

The Playhouse was built as a chapel for the House of Refuge, a children's home and reform school, in 1874. When the University of Louisville settled into the Belknap Campus in 1925, the building was used for assembly, lectures and drama. ... When the University of Louisville's master plan for development revealed a serious threat to the Playhouse, many of us went into battle. ... The Chamber Music Society's deep concern did persuade the university to number the parts of the Playhouse and to reconstruct it at a cost of \$1 million. It rests now, with its still-charming lines, at a busy intersection between Second and Third Streets.

“A Matter of Money” provided the following informative details concerning the costs involved in presenting the concerts. It was written by the immediate past-president at the time of the 50th Anniversary, Sara L. Creed: Loyal supporters have always been generous with both their allegiance and their checkbooks, allowing us to grow in musical excellence and keep up with rising costs of the best chamber music groups. ... The first season was launched on \$500 collected from chamber-music enthusiasts anxious to see Louisville launch a program series. ... By the fifth season, the Budapest Quartet alone cost a princely sum--\$400—almost as much as the entire first season.

Through the years chamber-music groups that have developed a special relationship with Louisville, like the Budapest, the Juilliard Quartet and the Beaux Arts Trio, have shown some flexibility in their normally rigid fee structure for their CMS appearances. ... Today [1988] artists' fees for a five-concert season are over \$40,000; the highest priced group each season is now \$12,000—not the Budapest's \$400 of old. Yet, we are still registering bargains as musical contracts go. ... The generosity of the audience remains the sustaining financial support of the Chamber Music Society, and that is as its founders wanted it to be. ... The future looks bright—but expensive. Chamber music-lovers will continue to be asked to support this special series of *their* music. In another 25 years, we'll look back in amazement that we could bring Louisville the Juilliard and the Tokyo and the Stuttgart and other groups of such quality for a mere \$40,000!

THE PAST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS:

Let us begin a brief retrospective on the past twenty-five years by taking up the topic with which past-president Sara Creed ended the discussion in 1988: “A Matter of Money.” Elsewhere in her article she stated that the artist fees for the 1987-88 50th anniversary season cost \$43,250. For comparison the artist fees for this 75th anniversary will cost \$74,500. Yet that is for this special year, and does not represent what regular seasons have cost during the past decade. We have had to stay within \$48-50,000 for artist fees on a regular basis, which is not that much more than expended a quarter of a century ago. What I find absolutely astounding is the fact that a Society

which has lost half of its subscriber base since its 50th anniversary, for various reasons which is a topic for another time, has yet been able to present seasons with the same level of quality and lack of compromise that characterized the first fifty years. This is completely due to the continuing generosity of donors at various levels of giving who remain even more the sustaining support for the Society as they did at the time of its 50th year. It is they who allow us to continue.

With regard to programming, there have been some very special presentations which I will highlight briefly below. And there has been an effort to expand the variety of offerings. In 1988 we were still building seasons around the presentation of a single ensemble each year—the Budapest Quartet having been replaced by the Juilliard Quartet. We now present several of the finest string quartets on a regular basis. We have tried each season to schedule an event of mixed instrumentation. With regard to repertoire, it is interesting to note that through 1988 we had only presented three of the fifteen Shostakovich string quartets. During the past twenty-five years we have presented ten more, and have only two remaining to complete our hearing of this most important body of work. In terms of classic masters, we have presented Beethoven 47 times, Mozart 37 times, Brahms 21 times, Schubert 17 times, Haydn 16 times, and Mendelssohn and Dvořák 10 times each.

As to special events, in 1990 we presented the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. In 1998, to celebrate the bicentennial of the University of Louisville, we presented Chicago Pro Musica performing “L’histoire du Soldat” by Stravinsky complete with narrator and mime. Later that same year we recreated live a recording by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center with pianists Lee Luvisi and Gilbert Kalish performing the Bartok Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion. In 2000 we presented The New York Festival of Song with “Evidence of Things Not Seen” by Ned Rorem—a cycle of 36 songs for four voices and piano in all combinations. In 2002 Kurt Ollmann, baritone, and pianist Jeffry Peterson performed a Mahler lieder recital. In 2003 we continued the presentation of renowned early music ensembles with Musica Antiqua Köln under Reinhard Goebel. In 2004 and 2009 we scheduled the excellent new music ensemble eighth blackbird, which has gone on to be the premier group in this genre. This special 75th season will present Chicago Pro Musica and the masterpiece “Pierrot Lunaire” by Arnold Schoenberg on the 100th anniversary of its composition. And with regard to standard chamber music ensembles during the past twenty-five years we joined nineteen other presenters, including Carnegie Hall, in establishing the Kalichstein/Laredo/Robinson International Trio Award which has given and will continue to give us stunning performances by young piano trios.

--Acton Ostling, Jr.