

City Music created to promote classical music



Arts activists Eugenia and Ron Strauss, long-time supporters of classical music in Cleveland, and Beverly Simmons, former executive director of Early Music America, are the prime movers behind CityMusic, the newest star in Cleveland's ever-burgeoning music firmament. The chamber orchestra concludes its spring series Friday, March 18 and Saturday, March 19. (Photograph by John Bashian)

BY MARTHA TOWNS

Wherever you look at the arts groups in Cleveland, there are two issues every one of them is facing: audiences are not growing and audiences are aging.

Add to that the lack of music and art education in many schools, the lure of movies, 300-channel cable systems and all the other activities competing for the entertainment dollar and the problem looks even worse.

Audience development is the name of the game, and, with that in mind, there's a group of Clevelanders who have put their hearts and minds behind a new orchestra called CityMusic with no other agenda than to stimulate interest in music in front of audiences which may have no other access.

Those who see CityMusic as competition may be interested to know that the impetus for CityMusic came from none other than Jeannette Sorrell, the founder and director of the highly successful Apollo's Fire. In a conversation at the Cleveland Heights home of Eugenia and Ron Strauss, she suggested something was needed to attract new audiences to classical music. That was all the Strausses had to hear.

An allergist by profession, Ron Strauss is a fine violinist who now takes lessons in Oberlin. He loves nothing more than a good chamber music session at home and the Strausses usually have a musician or two as houseguests. Dr. Strauss has also presented chamber concerts in other venues. Eugenia has had a great deal of experience working with the arts at Cleveland Ballet, the Cleveland School of the Arts and Pilobolus, the New York dance company. Add Beverly Simmons, close friend and former executive director of Early Music America, throw in arts supporter Clurie Bennis, and bassist Tracy Rowell, and you have the core group. In a five-hour meeting in the Strausses' back yard, CityMusic was born.

After being turned down by the major foundations, the group was able to secure start-up money from several family foundations, all of which, Eugenia noted, are run by women. The first series of concerts took place last fall and the second series concludes this weekend. Friday, March 18, CityMusic performs at the United Methodist Church, Eddy Road, in Willoughby Hills and Saturday, March 19, in St. Stanislaus Church, E. 65th St., in Slavic Village. Families are welcome and donations gratefully accepted. The concerts are free. With each concert there is an art exhibit. The watercolors of Elise Newman, Alix Travis, and Jan Stickney will be shown in conjunction with the March concerts.

"We have had growing pains, and we are learning a lot," said Eugenia, as Bev nodded in agreement. For the two women, CityMusic has become nearly a full-time labor of love. Prior to scheduling concerts, contracts are made with officials in the communities and with those in charge of venues. "We have the ability to go all the way down into a community and work at a very grass roots level," she added. "We work with councilmen and mayors to present our case, and we engage them in the process." Added Bev, "Our hope is to become part of the fabric of a number of different communities." The hope, said Ron, is that "people who are exposed to this music will be touched and want to hear more."

The musicians who play with CityMusic are all professionals who free-lance in the city taking jobs wherever they can find them. "The musicians love it [CityMusic]," said Eugenia. "That's what makes it so exciting for us; we're able to present great music with great musicians and top conductors. We're happy that we're existing this year. Every person we're reaching is important."

CityMusic has a website created by Bev's daughter, Selena Simmons-Duffin, a student at Stanford. It is ever-changing and can be seen at www.citymusiccleveland.org.