

The String Quartet and Beyond: Chamber Music Flourishes in Philly

By Peter Burwasser

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The chamber music scene in Philadelphia runs the gamut from the world renowned offerings of the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society and the Kimmel Center to informal gatherings of musician friends playing for small audiences in churches and neighborhood parks. The remarkable and completely wonderful reality of this situation is that the range in quality and inspiration within this world is very narrow. This is partly due to a high level of expectations; a substandard musical presentation in Philadelphia is as doomed to failure as is a mediocre restaurant in Paris.

The scene is also informed by the special place of chamber music in the hearts of the performers, as is the case the world over. It is common, in this town, to hear a musician performing on the stage of a Kimmel Center venue one night and encounter the same person happily playing away in a small community concert the next day.

At the core of the scene are the well-established organizations that specifically refer to their mission as presenting chamber music, chiefly, the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, which will present concerts by many of the world's best-known musicians in the coming season, but also local groups such as 1807 and Friends, Conwell Woodwind Quintet, Westminster Brass, Philadelphia Classical Guitar Trio, Time for Three and others. The Kimmel Center has become a tremendously important new component of the chamber music season in Philadelphia, with programming that not only brings in international superstars, but also expands the very definition of the genre with world music, jazz, and new music events presented in the exciting *Fresh Ink* series.

The self-presenting groups deserve special attention because they cater to intensely devoted audiences, whom they reward with unusual repertoire and gutsier and more technically risky performances than they might offer in a more institutional setting. 1807 and Friends, for example, has been giving public performances since 1981, but the musicians, including some of the finest in the city, have played privately at the group's namesake, a row-house at 1807 Sansom Street, for over forty years. The public face of the organization grew out of a desire to get that pure love for music and spontaneity of expression onto a concert stage.

There is no doubt that at the present time, the epicenter of the local scene is the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society. They are such a vital part of the concert world here

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that, like the Philadelphia Orchestra, it is hard to imagine life without them. In fact, they have only been around since 1986, when they presented seven concerts. In the upcoming season, they will offer sixty-three concerts at ten different venues, with programming including a healthy dose of new music and even jazz. PCMS is especially valuable as the leading presenter of that quintessential chamber music entity, the string quartet. Thanks to PCMS, Philadelphians can regularly hear from the venerable masters of the form, including the Guarneri, the Julliard, the Tokyo, the Emerson, and such outstanding upcoming foursomes as the Miami, the Brentano, the Artemis and many others.

“At this point,” says executive director Philip Maneval, “while we never intended it, we believe that PCMS may be the largest presenter of chamber music in the United States. Our motivation along the way, however, has always been to allow area audiences to share our great enthusiasm for outstanding music-making, in all its many forms, and to make these concerts as broadly accessible as possible.”

Although PCMS was not formally constituted until 1986, their roots go much further back, with connections that have much to do with the currently robust state of the pool of freelance instrumentalists here. The great pianist Rudolf Serkin was a co-founder of the legendary Marlboro Music Festival, in Vermont, and was the artistic director at the Curtis Institute of Music some years later. The Marlboro-Curtis connection remains strong to this day, and an important source for world class music-making here. The direct predecessor to PCMS was the three-concert Musicians From Marlboro series that Anthony Checchia, PCMS’s artistic director, had been presenting in Philadelphia since the 1960's.

If chamber music is defined simply as small ensemble music-making, and there is probably no better way to put it, then the category becomes huge, encompassing almost every musical entity in town in some way. All of the orchestras, for example, also engage in chamber music programming of some sort, including the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia, and Orchestra 2001. The orchestra series, in particular, offers a stimulating reflection of the large scale repertoire, with music director Christoph Eschenbach often joining in as pianist, just as his predecessor Wolfgang Sawallisch did.

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And then there are the specialty groups, from the two chronological ends of the music world: original instrument groups and contemporary music. Ensembles such as Philomel, Tempesta di Mare, and Piffaro perform music from the baroque and before on period instruments, and although in some cases these organizations can muster enough musicians to break into the category of an orchestra, in most cases they are chamber music ensembles. That same basic operating principal also applies to the two major Philadelphia-based new music ensembles, Relâche and Network for New Music. The Prism Saxophone Quartet, of course, neatly falls into the class of chamber music by virtue of their constitution. Prism and Piffaro also serve as musical ambassadors for Philadelphia in their extensive touring activities, which take both ensembles around the world. And all of these groups portray the diversity of this city's musical community with an extensive catalogue of CD releases.

Contemporary chamber music comes with a special set of challenges, as Network for New Music artistic director Linda Reichert explains. "The study and performance of traditional music has always informed my own performances of new music, and vice versa. The study of Beethoven sonatas, and the perennial newness of his writing, was what originally got me interested in new music and composition in the first place. The big challenge, and the fun of it, is for us musicians to bring the same nuance, the same emotional and intellectual understanding and level of expressivity that we automatically bring to Brahms or Beethoven, to the contemporary work. This level of understanding and conviction, usually translating into lots of practice, is absolutely necessary to 'sell' the new work to the audience. 'Good-enough' performances of contemporary music are just not good enough any more!"

Another vital source of chamber music is the college scene. The University of Pennsylvania does not have a performance faculty, but there has always been a solid concert series there, consisting of both homegrown talent and visiting musicians. In addition to the pioneering work of the Penn's venerable early music programs, there has long been an emphasis on the presentation of the music of Penn's famous composition department, with important concerts of music by such luminaries as George Crumb,

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George Rochberg, Richard Wernick, as well as younger voices such as James Primosch and Jay Reise gaining prominent exposure.

The situation steps up considerably in the case of such conservatory institutions as the Curtis Institute of Music and the Esther Boyer School of Music at Temple. Both schools offer generous seasons of superb concerts, almost all of them free. Settlement Music School, which is not a professional training institution, is nevertheless an important venue for a wide variety of chamber music concerts throughout the year, featuring both visiting groups and members of the excellent faculty. The Curtis student recitals, which take place three times a week during the school year in their venerable Rittenhouse Square hall, are in a class by themselves, combining world class musicianship and youthful ardor in a uniquely inspiring way.

One of the more dynamic new organizations presenting chamber music is Astral Artistic Services, and they are, in a direct sense, an outgrowth of the fresh young face of the student scene. Astral was founded in 1991 by Vera Wilson as a showcase for the many superb musicians emerging from Curtis, Temple, the Academy of Vocal Arts and elsewhere, and behind the scenes, provides career development and guidance, with a special emphasis on community outreach. Wilson does not consider Astral a chamber music organization, exactly, but much of their programming involves ensembles. "Our applicants are looking for solo careers, but they often tell us of a thirst for the opportunity to play chamber music with other performers of their caliber." And Astral serves as a stepping stone to big league performance series around the world. "We consider it a real sign of success when our musicians appear on the roster of the Chamber Music Society, as many of them eventually do."

And chamber music is popping up in all kinds of unusual venues, even the occasional bar. The modern pioneer for such a concept is probably the legendary punk club CBGBs, in lower Manhattan, but the Old City club Tin Angel did showcase cellist Matt Haimowitz last season. There are also excellent series at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, offbeat but compelling chamber music at the annual Fringe Festival, and a particularly invigorating monthly salon that is organized by the composer and pianist Andrea Clearfield and held at her Center City home.

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Of course, there have been casualties over the years, including the Chamber Music Consort, the Mozart Orchestra, Mozart on the Square, and Davidsbund Chamber Players. This last group, organized by violinist Charles Parker, hung in there for over twenty years, but like all such groups, operated as a labor of love. “Our annual budget was, don’t laugh, about \$5000, and we didn’t always make it. We would get calls every August from regulars who just wanted to make sure we were having another season.”

Happily, there seems to be a new group forming nearly every season. They are created for any number of reasons, usually to fill a niche that is perceived by the musicians, but almost always simply because the members like making music with one another, and relish the opportunity to share that joy. Chamber Music Now! begins their third season this fall. It was founded by composers Richard Belcastro and David Laganella as a means of disseminating their own material and showcasing other new music as well as a variety of music and performers in differing venues. The Chamber Music Now! lineup this season certainly reflects this outlook, with a tango program from the Auros Group for New Music, a multimedia event in conjunction with First Friday in Old City, a piano recital by the extraordinary new music specialist Marilyn Nonken, and a return visit from the Serafin String Quartet in the spring.

Belcastro wants his concerts to do a better job connecting to the audience, something he thinks there is a need for in Philadelphia. So far, he is pleased with the results, noting a growing audience and a more youthful one at that. Last season’s presentation of the Swedish guitar group Duo Con Forza was a model of their working philosophy. “The audience fell in love with them. They wouldn’t let them go back stage during intermission and stayed after the concert and chatted some more.”

The very latest addition to the scene is the Ninth Street Music Project, named after the famous South Philadelphia market street, in the neighborhood where most of the musicians live. The group was formed last year by double bassist Mary Javien and New York City native David Yang, violist. They have been joined by violinist Zachary DePue and cellist Yumi Kendall, both new members of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Yang has been disappointed by some aspects of the local chamber music world, noting, for example, that “there’s no great full-time string quartet based in Philadelphia.” With six

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concerts already planned for the coming season, Yang wants to help make Philadelphia more dynamic and expand the scene, hoping to make music where “there’s a fire on the stage.” As usual, it is all being done on the proverbial shoestring. Yang laughs in agreement when it is suggested that it is not the profit motive that is driving Ninth Street Music Project. “Joseph Gingold, many years back, said something like this: chamber music is the most rewarding musically and least rewarding financially.”

Chamber Music Now! and Ninth Street Music Project are comprised of young musicians who yearn for an audience of their contemporaries, and in doing so battle a persistent misconception about chamber music, mainly, that it is a format that appeals primarily to older audiences. It is hard not to notice, for example, the sea of gray heads at most PCMS concerts. Philip Maneval: “I remember Charles Rosen's comment, that the death of classical music is perhaps its oldest continuing tradition. Gary Graffman pointed out that in the 1940's there were only two major concert managements, with a total of about 40 pianists between them. Last year's Musical America directory listed 624 pianists. So maybe we should be worrying more about glut then decline. Clearly this is an art form that, for whatever reason, seems to have greater appeal to people later in their lives. Fortunately, however, once people become regular classical music attendees they are usually very faithful and devoted, unlike popular music audiences who can easily change their tastes and allegiances.”

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