

# Classical Music Chat

*Stories, advice and more from classical presenters*

Volume III, Spring 2022

**Meany Center for the Performing Arts,  
Seattle, WA**  
**By Michelle Witt**

**Please tell us a bit about the Meany Center and your series (and yourself if you wish), its history and its current activities etc.** Meany Center occupies a unique place in the Puget Sound cultural ecosystem: Founded in 1980, we are one of the Northwest's leading performing arts presenters, bringing diverse artists in dance, international chamber music, global music, and piano recitals from around the world. I have been the Executive & Artistic Director of Meany Center since 2011.

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As a performing arts center on a college campus, education and engagement inform everything we do; we offer meaningful artistic and learning experiences on campus and in our communities throughout the season. Risk-taking and supporting the creative process are important to us, and we work to build bridges between and among diverse communities, even throughout the pandemic. Performances, in-school residencies, free community performances, lectures, and opportunities to engage with visiting artists in person and virtually are all part of this. We've also created more opportunities for artists, particularly artists of color and under-represented

artists. One of the places that Meany Center has invested significantly, is in supporting the creative process of artists and in becoming a conduit for new and innovative work and interdisciplinary collaborations.

**Are there any suggestions you have for classical presenters for attracting new audiences to classical music events?** One of the exciting challenges for our field is in further developing creative entry points for audiences and developing meaningful points of intersection with communities.



For example, anytime we can include community members (including students and faculty) performing with visiting artists on stage, participating in conversations, and in off-site presentations is a huge win. In thinking about increasing access for new generations of artists and audiences, we continue to be interested in pursuing interdisciplinary collaborations that create multiple entry points for new audiences and

relevant ways to connect with artists and with one another.

Meany has inaugurated a new pilot position of Artistic Associate. This one-year rotating pilot position will allow us to invite leading artists across a range of disciplines to “embed” within our organization, bringing with them fresh perspectives and creative ideas. The benefits for artists, for Meany Center and for audiences are powerful: artists are empowered by having a participatory voice at Meany; new voices keep Meany Center programming relevant; and artists are in dialogue with partners on and off campus, thus igniting connections with and interest among new campus and community members. The more our field can engage directly with artists by sharing power and agency, the more relevant and exciting our work will be.



**Are there ways that you engage your donor base that you feel are successful?** Our donors want to be able to both see the impact of their contributions and be personally involved in artistic experiences. Until the global pandemic shut our doors two years ago, in-school residencies and free student matinees have been at the heart of our youth engagement, along with offering tickets for youth under 18 to classical music events and \$10 UW student tickets to all Meany Center Visiting Artist programs. Even during the worst of the pandemic, we served our K-12 community with digital presentations by visiting artists that could be viewed asynchronously and were available free-of-charge to students, their families, and teachers. The more opportunities we can give our donors to experience the impact of these programs, and to

connect with students and community members, the more engaged they become.

We also give our donors as many opportunities as possible to engage directly with artists. Sometimes that means traveling to connect with artists at festivals, but more frequently it’s creating access to an artist conversation, rehearsal, a k-12 school environment, or a campus classroom. Often that means creating social opportunities to connect with artists when they are here. All of that has been challenging with the pandemic, of course. We are also expanding our donor base in ways that will hopefully create greater equity for community members who want to participate but don’t necessarily see themselves as large donors.

**How has your subscription base and single ticket buyers changed over the years?** We have had very loyal subscribers for classical music, however it’s very hard to know how this will change post-pandemic; we are prepared that a certain percentage of our subscribers may not come back. This makes the imperative of new audience development even more important and creates an opportunity for us to embrace risk and innovation even more fully, even if it means we may not please our most traditional loyalists and could lose some subscribers in the process. Newer and younger audiences tend to be more single ticket buyers, and that is a trend that we see happening in many places.

**How has the pandemic affected your organization?** In the fiscal year 2021, we had no live performances and presented digital content free-of-charge. Because of this, we relied almost entirely on contributed income. Fortunately, we were able to reduce our expenses significantly, while paying artists fees for virtual content, and having large savings in production, travel, and marketing expenses. Our primary financial goals during the pandemic were to find ways to pay artists and avoid staff layoffs, and we successfully accomplished both of those goals. To cover essential work and avoid layoffs, many staff took on alternative duties. Front-of-House, for example, project managed virtual content creation as well as expanded accessibility through closed captioning.

In the current fiscal year 2022, we are back to live performances and so expenses have increased greatly, while ticket sales are only around 50% of historical sales. We programmed fewer performances this season to keep expenses lower as we emerge from the pandemic with smaller audiences. But we are still heavily relying on contributed income.

**What do you see in the future for organizations that present classical music?** We have been proactive about asking artists on our chamber music and piano series to broaden their programs to include classical and contemporary women and BIPOC composers. Response from artists has been overwhelmingly positive—this season, for example, pianist Jeremy Denk performs a program that moves from Bach and Schubert to Thomas “Blind Tom” Wiggins and Scott Joplin before culminating in Beethoven’s final piano sonata. This is only one example of the exceptionally creative and interesting programs that artists have brought to Meany this season.

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Our challenge as a field is to continue to ask for, and support, the presentation and centering of underrepresented works, composers and performers, non-traditional forms of classical music, and extending the repertoire through commissioning and creative presentations. I am also interested in interdisciplinary collaborations where artistic ideas are explored and amplified through the intersections of film, choreography, theater, visual art, and literature – with music. There is tremendous potential here in connecting with new audiences and in supporting artists in meaningful ways that extends the repertoire and sheds new light on existing repertoire.

## **How Women's Amateur Music Clubs Spawned Concert Presenting Organizations**

### **in America**

**By Gail Wein**

For many years, I satisfied my urge to make music as an amateur bassoonist by playing with an orchestra run by the Friday Morning Music Club (FMMC) in Washington, DC. The organization was founded in 1886 by 15 women who met every month to study music and perform for each other.

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Even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, FMMC was not unique. In 1883, the first national convention of women's amateur music clubs was held at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. By the turn of the last century, many of the clubs had already developed well-attended and well-financed concert series and were being described as the country's most successful sponsors of European artists, according to the book *Cultivating Music in America: Women Patrons and Activists since 1860*. By 1919, there were over 600 similar organizations in the United States, with a combined membership of around 200,000, all founded by small groups of women who craved participating in the performing arts.

***Cultivating Music in America* declares that these grassroots clubs were so successful that by 1927 the National Federation of Music Clubs reported that, outside of large cities, individual clubs managed three-fourths of the country's public concerts, spending approximately a million dollars to book performing artists.**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, some of these clubs continued to focus on their own members' music-making. Many others, such as St. Cecilia Music Center in Grand Rapids, Cleveland Fortnightly Musical Club, Ladies Music Club of Seattle and the Tuesday Musical Concert Series in Omaha, bring top-rank classical performers to their community for public concerts.



Earlier musical societies in the United States were created and run by men – notably the St. Cecilia Society in Charleston, SC, founded in 1766; one of the first musical societies in the Colonies. In the spirit of the 18<sup>th</sup> century British concert organizations on which it was modelled, membership was not open to women. The society presented full seasons of concerts, including performances by its in-house professional orchestra, for nearly 50 years.

However, according to *Smithsonian Magazine's* December 2020 article, *How Young America Came to Love Beethoven*, it was the proliferation of the women's clubs that spawned the performing arts presenting industry in this country.

Another group, also named for St. Cecilia (she is the patron saint of music, after all), was founded in 1883. Nine women in Grand Rapids, MI, were determined to “promote the study and appreciation

of music in all its branches.” Like many other clubs of its ilk, members initially performed for one another in house concerts. However, it wasn’t long before they were bringing internationally renowned musical artists to the city to perform for the general public, according to St. Cecilia Music Center’s website. Within ten years of its founding, the organization broke ground on a concert hall with a 600 seat auditorium and several smaller event spaces. The organization continues to present performances at the now-landmarked *St. Cecilia Music Center*, where there is also an active School of Music.

According to *Cultivating Music in America*, some of the women who had organized concert series for their respective clubs stepped out on their own to become independent concert managers. One particularly successful independent female manager was Adella Prentiss Hughes. She honed her skills as a manager through a position created specifically for her by Cleveland’s Fortnightly Musical Club in 1901. From the beginning, ticket sales under Hughes exceeded expectations, and by its sixth season, Fortnightly was in the black. In her first 15 years with Fortnightly, Hughes presented the orchestras of Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Minneapolis, as well as the Thomas Orchestra and the Russian Symphony Orchestra (a New York-based émigré ensemble). She went on to a successful half-century career in concert management, and Cleveland music became known in New York as “Hughes Who.”

The Ladies Musical Club of Seattle began in 1891 by women who were classically trained musicians. Their mission was to bring high-quality music to the Pacific Northwest town, which just ten years prior had a population of 3,500. At their annual Artist Concert Series, they brought an eye-popping parade of luminaries to the burgeoning city. Sergei Rachmaninoff, Marian Anderson, Percy Grainger, Igor Stravinsky, Pablo Casals, Walter Damrosch and the New York Symphony Orchestra, Marilyn Horne, and Artur Rubenstein top the list.

The St. Cecilia and LMC music clubs and many others live on. However, the Tuesday Musical organization in Omaha closed its doors in 2015, after 123 years of presenting concerts. When it began in 1892, its members performed for each other in private concerts, but just as Fortnightly and

others did, it soon began presenting concerts featuring international artists.

A 2015 article in *Classical Voice North America* states that during the early decades of its existence, Tuesday Musical was the only presenter of top-quality classical music in Omaha, and its concerts attracted more than 1,000 people. “Tuesday Musical was the only game in town when they started,” said Barbara Taxman, board member and spokesperson for the group, in an article in the *Omaha World-Herald* in 2015. “After 1911, it expanded into local theaters and emerged as a nonprofit concert series of international artists.” By the 2010’s, ticket sales were in a steep decline. Taxman said, “I thought ‘Maybe it is time to say goodbye’. There are other places to go to hear very fine music.”

In that way, Tuesday Musical has achieved its mission. Nowadays area audiences have their pick of events put on by Opera Omaha, the Omaha Symphony and Omaha Performing Arts.

In March, Women’s History Month, it is particularly apt to tell the story of the significant role that 19th and 20th century American women played in the development of today’s concert presenters. In the 19th and 20th century American women played a major role in the development of today’s classical concert presentations. It’s hard to imagine what our country’s concert scene would be without their contribution.

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Tom Gallant is the Editor of Classical Music Chat and Director of General Arts Touring and has always worn many hats as a professional musician, concert producer and artist manager. Over the years he has been involved in managing several summer music festivals and produced concerts in a wide variety of places from Carnegie Hall in New York City to Queen Elizabeth Hall in London. Tom produced his first concerts in his backyard and his living room as a child at the age of 12!