

Classical Music Chat

Stories, advice and more from classical presenters

Howland Chamber Music Circle Beacon, NY

Please tell us a bit about the Howland Chamber Music Circle - its history and its current activities.

The Howland Chamber Music Circle was founded in 1992 as a modest series of 3-4 concerts in a historic building in the economically depressed city of Beacon, NY. Over the years it has grown and blossomed into a series of 8 chamber music concerts, a 4-concert Piano Festival, a 4-concert Classics for Kids series, in-school chamber music programs, and about four occasional free Pop-Up concerts in locations throughout the city. Over the years since our founding, the city of Beacon—a small historically industrial city on the banks of the Hudson River 60 miles north of New York City—has also enjoyed a spectacular rebirth fueled largely by the arts.



Are there ways that you engage your donor base that you feel are successful?

We do not focus so much on engaging our “donor base” as much as we do our “patrons”. That is to say, we find that if we can produce a wonderful experience, build a

community of friends, maintain extremely high standards in a comfortable and welcoming environment, that people will come out to support it.

Building a sense of community among our patrons has proven to be very successful. We hold a reception immediately after every concert where patrons not only meet the musicians but they can talk among themselves building friendships over their shared experience. This is an important part of not only making the concert an enjoyable experience, but to engender a community of friends.

We have found that engaging local retirement communities provides for a solid base of patrons. One community, for example, typically buses about 10-15 patrons to many of our concerts. Older people generally have more time to attend concerts and expendable cash which makes them not only loyal patrons, but also consistent and generous donors.

How has your subscription base and single ticket buyers changed over the years? That is to say, do you have a stable subscriber base or a large percentage of single ticket buyers these days.?

We generally sell at least half of our tickets by subscription. Of our 12

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“mainstage” concerts, our patrons have the option to purchase from 4 to 12 concerts as a subscription. The more concerts they buy, the greater the percentage of savings. We also found that by bundling four piano recitals, over roughly four months, together as a “Piano Festival” to be a highly successful marketing tool. There are several patrons who subscribe to this mini-series without attending any of the chamber music concerts. We’ve also tried over the past few years to have a theme that runs throughout the season with the hope that this through-line will encourage people to purchase a series of concerts. The remainder of our tickets are sold in the weeks before the concert. Our hall is small—maximum of 125 patrons—so we typically sell out.

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What are some things that the organization does that helps to retain and grow your audience? Please give us an idea of how you market the series, do you send out a brochure for instance, use Facebook, local publicity - are any of these methods more successful than others?

From the beginning, our series has focused on the youth. We have engaged musicians in our Classics for Kids concerts that introduces children to Classical Music, but also their parents to our series. For many years we have embedded a professional string quartet in an area high school for four days of coaching, and we have presented musical ensembles in concert at our local elementary schools. While none of this would be described as “marketing our series” it does provide us great exposure among the young adults that will be tomorrow’s patrons. We’ve also found that these types of educational programs are well-loved by area foundations and corporate donors. They are more eager to provide funds if they know the money will be used for educational purposes. Our youth programs, whether they are concerts or educational, are not ticketed events and yet still need to be funded. Foundations have been able to provide that funding.

Our free Pop-Up concerts throughout the community are also a way to make us more visible in the community and draw people to us who would not otherwise attend one of our concerts. These types of program, which are free and open to all, are also well supported by community foundations that want to encourage this type of program. Regarding marketing, email is our primary marketing tool. We have found that print media is largely not read

any more (sadly) so we don’t advertise there, however our area classical music radio station, WMHT, reaches our target audience directly so we have utilized them for marketing and that has been very effective in drawing people from a wider geographic area. We are also very active on social media—Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. During normal times (before/after the pandemic) we send out one brochure annually to advertise our new season and solicit subscriptions. Years ago, we sent out cards in the mail to remind people of upcoming concerts, however we have abandoned that and now use the more cost-effective method of email.

Many classical concert series across the country have experienced declining attendance. Are there some suggestions you can share that have worked for you?

Collaborate with area organizations. Whether it’s a restaurant, wine shop, dance studio, church, etc., try to work together. We’re all looking to put people into chairs, so see if you could match your mutual goals. Look for synergies between your goals and theirs. For example, reach out to music teachers or music schools in the area and hold a master class with your visiting artists and their students.

Try to keep yourself visible in the community. If there’s a community event, setup a booth to hand out brochures and collect email addresses; if another organization is having a silent auction fundraiser, offer free tickets as a prize; keep a constant presence on social media and don’t only post to advertise your concerts—be a “voice” in the community.

Maintain a welcoming environment. Classical music often has an image problem that it is something elitist and only for the rich. That’s far from the truth and we need to do what you can to break down that barrier. People who aren’t familiar with classical music feel intimidated by things like when to clap and when not to, what all those numbers are after a piece of music (Op.3, No. 2), etc. We need to demystify it without dumbing it down. Encourage musicians to speak during concerts as this makes everyone (including the musicians, generally) more comfortable.

Coastal Concerts

Lewes, DE



CoCo's success has been aided by the popularity of the Lewes area for retirement and second homes. Although Lewes is a small town of approximately 2,500, the surrounding areas are seeing booming growth, as retirees settle here in greater numbers and others build second homes.

The town is strategically located with easy access to bay and ocean beaches. It is in driving distance from Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington and New York City. One of our current marketing challenges is to let newcomers know we are here and expose them to the high level of musicianship we present.

“Only when we placed a questionnaire with pencil on every seat in our venue and collected them at the end of the concert did we get the results we were looking for. Lesson learned: Make it as easy as possible for patrons to express their reactions before leaving the venue.”

CoCo is also fortunate to have had two talented and dedicated Executive Directors in recent years. Under their leadership, we have struck a nice balance between adherence to strict budgeting processes and quality programming. Our grant-writing capabilities have grown and our community involvement and outreach activities have benefited from the quality and commitment our volunteers bring to the organization. As an example, our competitive scholarship program for area middle and high school students recently received the largest number of applicants in its history.

In addition to marketing on our Facebook page, feeding cultural calendars and posting an online monthly newsletter to our subscribers, we send out news releases to local media outlets and do targeted advertising.



We are dedicated to obtaining feedback from the audiences. We tried having a post-concert questionnaire online but that yielded tepid results. Only when we placed a questionnaire with pencil on every seat in our venue and collected them at the end of the concert did we get the results we were looking for. Lesson learned: Make it as easy as possible for patrons to express their reactions before leaving the venue.

To diversify our programming, we started to add a Wild Card concert that enabled us to feature untraditional fare each season. And to underwrite it, we approached Dogfish Head Brewery whose headquarters are in our region. They liked the idea of pairing an unconventional concert approach with their “Off Centered” brand. And the musicians who come to town like it, too, especially if they have time to take a brewery tour.

Like all classical music organizations, we try to program a mix of established musicians and performers who are in the early stages of their careers.

A relatively new addition to our schedule is the pre-concert discussions presented by CoCo volunteer Lani Spahr, an internationally award-winning audio remastering engineer, who retired to Lewes after a career as one of the world's leading classical oboe players. His talks have become very popular with our audience and have the added advantages of ensuring that many ticket-holders get to the venue early to enjoy them and of cutting down on late-arrival rushes.

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When COVID caused the shut-down of our existing venue to all outside rental groups, we searched for other possibilities and had no success in the Lewes area. The virus-driven hiatus did lead to a serious consideration of a venue in the nearby town of Georgetown. And this coming season we will have our opening concert in this second venue. If we can meet the dual challenge of persuading our existing patrons to travel there and attracting new attendees from the Georgetown area to give us a try, we will have the best of both worlds – the intimate setting of our existing church fellowship hall and a more accommodating setting for larger chamber ensembles. All will depend on how successful this experiment goes.

Chamber Music Society Williamsburg, VA

THE CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF WILLIAMSBURG

Please tell us a bit about the Chamber Music Society of Williamsburg - its history and its current activities, etc.

History: The Chamber Music Society of Williamsburg (CMSW) grew out of an informal series of concerts produced in 1986 at the Williamsburg Regional Library's Arts Center. Norfolk's Feldman Chamber Music Society was invited to partner with this project, and Bill Bynum, a William & Mary professor and ardent chamber music aficionado, offered to help with publicity. In 1987, Bynum assembled a board of directors, incorporated the new Chamber Music Society of Williamsburg, and served as its first president. An early core of enthusiasts soon grew into a host of hard-core subscribers, leading to the sold-out seasons we currently enjoy. The Society still partners with the Feldman to present some of the most inspiring musicians on the concert circuit.

Adapted from:

<http://chambermusicwilliamsburg.org/about-the-cmsw/>

Current Activities: CMSW maintains a season of six concerts performed at the Williamsburg Regional Library's 266-seat auditorium.

Concerts are held on Tuesday evenings at 8:00 p.m. and generally are a repeat of the same program presented the previous evening (Monday) in Norfolk by the Feldman Chamber Music Society.

Partnering with the Feldman presumably makes our series more attractive and economical for chamber music ensembles, as they have only a short distance to travel between the two venues and only one overnight in between the performance dates.

CMSW Board members and Feldman Board members work together to choose the ensembles (looking for a mix of quartets, trios, and some diversity of musical styles and instrumentation) and then the program music. The

selection of ensembles is usually completed by October, music selection by March or April.

How is your organization run – all-volunteer? some paid staff? Please explain the major roles played by board members and staff.

All-volunteer (currently 16 members) except for a part-time paid web designer who handles the more involved webpage updating.



Board members serve for 3-year terms, with the opportunity to serve a second 3-year term. After a 2-year break, individuals can again serve on the Board.

Roles assigned to Board members include:

Officers: President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer

Other roles and committee chairs: Subscriptions Manager, Artist Selection co-chairs, Publicity, Program Notes, Hospitality, House Management, Print Production (for designing/layout/printing of brochures and programs), Webpage manager, Database manager (for lists of subscribers, donors, program music, mailing labels, etc.), Single Ticket manager, Nominating (to identify new Board members and new officers), Directors Manual editor). Remaining Board members serve on one or more of the committees.

There is a goal to give each Board member a responsibility of some type and to rotate roles from year to year, although some individuals occasionally serve multiple years in the same role (e.g., Treasurer).

Financial: CMSW has been able to save some funds and to create an endowment.

What are the successful ways in which you engage your donor base?

In the annual subscription renewal letter, we make an appeal for donations to help pay for concerts since the ticket prices do not cover costs. Names of donors are listed in each concert's program.

How have your subscription base and your single ticket buyers changed over the years? That is to say, do you have a stable subscriber base or a large percentage of single ticket buyers these days?

We have a very stable subscriber base, losing only 25 to 35 subscribers annually, but routinely gaining the same in new subscribers due to publicity and word-of-mouth.

The greater Williamsburg area is home to large retirement communities and an academic community (College of William & Mary), with many persons interested in the arts.

We have an all-volunteer board (currently 16 members) except for a part-time paid web designer who handles the more involved webpage updating.

The local retirement communities' activities directors include our concerts on their calendars, and a portion of our subscribers come to the concerts via their retirement community's buses.

Sale of *single concert* tickets is small – perhaps 10 to 20, depending on the concert and availability.

We encourage subscription renewals by reminding subscribers that our season sells out and by giving a firm deadline, after which subscriptions will be opened to new members. This appears to energize the subscription base and retain both their annual renewals and donations.

We have fortunately been able to keep our subscription prices low – thanks to donations and savings (the latter gives us a cushion).

What are some things that your organization does to retain and grow its audience? Please give us an idea of how you market the series – e.g., do you send out a brochure, use Facebook, local publicity? Are any of these methods more successful than others?

Quality and economy: We have worked with agents to hire terrific emerging groups before they command top dollar and, as noted above, we have kept our subscription prices low. Informal feedback from subscribers indicates that the quality and economy are great incentives.

Publicity:

Each spring, usually at the March concert, we provide the audience with next year's season brochure and subscription materials (a letter, subscription form, return envelope). For subscribers who haven't responded by a May/June date, subscription packets are mailed, usually in June or July.

In the late summer, subscribers receive a season ticket with all dates and times.

Before each concert, we send reminder postcards and emails. We might be phasing out the postcard reminders, but they have worked well in the past. Most of our audience members are senior citizens and some do not use email regularly.

We publicize the concerts in the local newspapers and other publications, generally in "Events" listings. In previous years, our concerts might receive a review by a music critic, but not recently.

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We maintain a website and a Facebook page with current information about the concerts and links to subscription information, including a waiting list for single tickets for a specific concert.

A few posters are created and placed in the public library and music department of the local university.

Classical Music Chat is produced by General Arts Touring

www.GeneralArtsTouring.com

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!