

## Cleveland Chamber Music Society: solving an annual programming puzzle

by Daniel Hathaway



The Cleveland Chamber Music Society's concert brochure presents information about its seven-concert season, neatly organized to include one concert each month, and all of them scheduled for Tuesday evenings.

This season, the Society has invited the Belcea Quartet, the Danish String Quartet, the Takács Quartet with pianist Marc-André Hamelin, cellist Steven Isserlis with pianist Connie Shih, the Pavel Haas Quartet, tenor Matthew Polenzani with pianist Julius Drake, and solo pianist Garrick Ohlsson to perform at Disciples

Church in Cleveland Heights.

How did this series of concerts come together? We went right to the source, programming committee chair Steve Somach, for insights into the selection process. We spoke this week by phone.

*Daniel Hathaway: I thought it would be interesting to write an article about how CCMS puts a season together, especially since you've got over twenty people on your board.*

Steve Somach: That's for sure.

*DH: It's always like solving a jigsaw puzzle, but I think in your case, it's kind of a special one.*

SS: Yes, it is. And I am the head of a program committee that tackles the programs and the artists that are invited. There are seven people on the committee and we function very democratically. We listen to a wide spectrum of artists and try to focus our

evaluations on recorded samples and performance tapes rather than on reviews. We take suggestions from the committee members, and also from the broader organization.

The decision-making process, though, is limited to that program committee. We do a fair amount of listening. We consolidate a number of candidate groups that we're interested in inviting, and everybody on the committee votes their priorities. We have to consider a variety of things — for instance, a group may only be on tour in this country for one week and there may be conflicts with other groups that the committee is interested in. So we come up with a candidate list and then fill in the pieces of that puzzle.

*DH: That all sounds very efficient and democratic.*

SS: Yes, we try to be. I've been running this committee for quite a while and I've found that the best results come when we have a broad input and all vote on the artists to come up with those that are favored by the majority.

*DH: And the Society does have some favorite artists, I believe.*

SS: We don't have a specific plan to invite people back again and again, but when we establish our priorities, which are based on artistic merit, there are a number of groups that keep coming up close to the top. Probably among the most frequent visitors are the Jerusalem String Quartet and the Takács String Quartet.

There are also a number of other favorites like Cuarteto Casals and the Belcea Quartet — who are performing our season opener. And the Wu Han - Phil Setzer - David Finckel Piano Trio have come several times, as have the artists from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.

Many groups bring a specific program but the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center has been a favorite because of the variety of programs they offer.

*DH: Speaking of varied programs, you have fewer string quartets coming this season.*

SS: Just based on the number of groups out there, and the string quartet literature being so rich, there are a lot of quartets that are extremely proficient and have satisfying program offerings. As you can see from looking at our programs, historically we tend to have three to four quartets per season out of seven concerts, and sometimes more. But we do strive for variety in our programming.

*DH: You're presenting a number of pianists this season, which has steered you away from Plymouth Church.*

SS: That's true. The challenge with Plymouth has been the difficulty in presenting anything with piano because of the remodeling they did a few years ago — we can't get the model of Steinway that most of the artists request into that venue. Because of that most of the concerts will take place at Disciples Christian Church this year.

*DH: You have some very fine pianists lined up this season. Are there some that you are personally looking forward to?*

SS: I look forward to all of our programs, but I think the evening with Marc-André Hamelin and the Takács Quartet is an interesting and varied program. I think the audience will really appreciate hearing the Florence Price Quintet, which was just recently discovered. It's a very engaging piece. And they're fabulous artists.

We really appreciate the opportunity to have Garrick Ohlsson back — he's a fabulous performer. And I personally always look forward to the vocal/piano recitals. I think that tenor Matthew Polenzani is a wonderful singer and Julius Drake is among the top collaborative pianists in the world today. They have a wonderful program.

*DH: It's great that you're inviting Steve Isserlis back.*

SS: Yes, he's terrific, and the attendees have always been enthusiastic about his performances over the years. It's been several years since we've had the opportunity to get him, so when we realized that we could make it work, we jumped at the opportunity.



*DH: Have you and the Society discovered outstanding new groups over the years?*

SS: I would like to think that we were among the first to appreciate the talents of the Jerusalem String Quartet (*left*). As part of our evaluation process, we discovered a recording of their performance and we were completely captivated. We were one of their early supporters, and Cleveland was one of their first performances in the U.S., if I'm not mistaken. They've gone on to have an extraordinary international career. So that's the group that comes to mind in terms of discoveries of a young group.

We're always looking at young ensembles that have gotten management and have won chamber music

competitions — we have a list of young groups whose careers we're following.

*DH: How far ahead does the committee plan?*

SS: Quite far ahead. The 2024-2025 season will be our 75th anniversary, and that season is set, although not all of the contracts have been completed. It's going to be wonderful with ten concerts, including a very special five-concert string quartet project. We're also going to have a wind ensemble, a pianist, a guitarist, a singer, a flutist, and a vocal ensemble. It's going to be a big blowout.

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