

## BlueWater Chamber Orchestra Turns Fifteen! (the first of two articles)

By Mike Telin



Conductor Carlton Woods led the Midland, Michigan Symphony from 1997 to 2007 while teaching at Central Michigan University. When he and his wife Ladonna retired, they chose to relocate to Westlake, where they spent their first year soaking up all that Northeast Ohio’s classical music scene had to offer.

“We had season tickets to everything — The Cleveland Orchestra, Apollo’s Fire — and we went to concerts at CIM, Baldwin Wallace, Oberlin, and Cleveland State University,” Ladonna said during a Zoom conversation.

Describing her late husband as the quintessential promoter in the world of classical music, Ladonna Woods said that after spending a lifetime in music, during

that first year of retirement she could see that her husband was getting bored. Then one day he asked her what she would think if he started a chamber orchestra.

“I thought, Oh, no, here we go. I knew that he wasn’t asking my permission, he was telling me that he had already worked all out. So I told him, ‘I think you’re crazy and I was really looking forward to us just going places and being a normal everyday couple.’ The interesting thing was that he had so much fun conducting. It was his love. And he kept saying, ‘Ladonna, someday they’re going to find out how much fun I’m having.’ When he said that, I thought, well, this is a done deal.”

With the arts world as small as it is, the conductor decided to contact cellist Kent Collier, whom he had known for many years, and run the idea past him. “Of course Kent thought he was crazy. He said, ‘Carlton, this will never happen.’ But Carlton’s mantra was that everything’s going to be fine. And it usually was. So here we are 15 years later.”



On Saturday at 7:30 pm at Church of the Covenant, BlueWater Chamber Orchestra under the direction of Daniel Meyer will continue their 15th Anniversary season with Tapestry of Virtuosity and Folklore. The program includes Paul Hindemith’s *Five Pieces for String Orchestra*, Felix

Mendelssohn’s *Konzertstück Nos. 1 & 2*, with soloist Afendi Yusuf (clarinet) and Amy Zoloto (basset horn), and Alberto Ginastera’s *Variaciones Concertantes*. The program will be repeated on Sunday at 3:00 pm at Lake Erie College in Painesville.

Pay-what-you-wish tickets are available at the door and [online](#).

Years of experience had taught the conductor that bringing a new ensemble to life would require the blessing of the state arts agency. “They met with a delightful lady from the Ohio Arts Council. It was a hard sell, but she did get them some money,” Ladonna recalled.

The next step was to come up with a catchy name. “Carlton wanted it to have something to do with water — we have Lake Erie and the burning river but we need to get rid of that connotation in people’s minds. And they came up with Blue Water.”



BlueWater Chamber Orchestra presented their first concert on Sunday, September 12, 2010 under the direction of founder and conductor Carlton R. Woods at the newly constructed Breen Center on the campus of St. Ignatius High School in Ohio City.

In his review for *Clevelandclassical.com* Daniel Hathaway wrote “Mr. Woods chose a substantial menu of attractive chamber orchestra works for Blue Water’s first outing:

Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, Hanson's *Serenade for Flute, Harp and Strings*, Beethoven's *Romance in F* for violin and orchestra, Elgar's *Serenade for Strings*, and Ginastera's *Variaciones Concertantes* — one piece each from France, the US, Austria, England and Argentina that required the orchestra to quickly adapt between national styles.”

Hathaway went on to say: “The ensemble’s playing this afternoon under Carlton Wood’s experienced leadership was masterful and idiomatic, and a good-sized crowd of friends, family and St. Ignatius students provided Blue Water with an enthusiastic and supportive audience for its maiden voyage.”

From the beginning Carlton Woods wanted his new orchestra to be from Cleveland for Cleveland. “I think that really drew the local musicians in — he always said ‘we have our own plethora of amazingly gifted professional musicians. So, we don't need to go elsewhere.’ I think that’s another reason, at least from Carleton's perspective, that the players felt such ownership with it,” Ladonna said.

Although the audiences were initially sparse, over time BlueWater attracted a following that is still growing. And fifteen years later the programming is as diverse and attractive as ever.

Ladonna said that although her husband had back, arm, and shoulder issues, as all conductors do, he had also suffered with congenital heart disease since the age 50. “The life of a conductor provided him a lot of cardiovascular exercise and both Mayo Clinic and Cleveland Clinic were astonished at the years he lived.”

As the conductor’s health began to fail, he encouraged the board to start looking for his successor. “And then when we knew that his death was a little more imminent, the board went on a search and he wanted to be a part of that search although he knew that was not something that all retiring conductors would do.”

Finding a conductor with youthful exuberance was important to Woods. “I’m not sure he met Daniel Meyer, but he had heard him conduct. And as luck would have it, Daniel was from Cleveland.”

Carlton Woods passed away on February 21, 2017 at his home in Westlake at the age of 75. The cause of death was congestive heart failure.

After many guest conducting appearances with BlueWater, Daniel Meyer led his first concert as the Orchestra’s Artistic Director in May 2019.

“Carlton always said about Blue Water — ‘they're so good, they don't need me. All I have to do is lift the baton, give the downbeat.’ It was that kind of enthusiasm that he imparted to the musicians. And I think Daniel does that.” Ladonna said. “I don't know how Daniel works — I just enjoy sitting back and listening. I do like the way he segues from one genre to the other, which is a lot like Carlton did.”

Ladonna said that Meyer has been the perfect conductor for BlueWater. “The musicians definitely are crazy about him and respond to him. And I think Carlton, if he were here, would be sitting on the front row clapping louder than anybody. Carlton founded it, now Daniel's taken it over, and hopefully it'll last another 15 years. Maybe Daniel will still be here. If not, somebody else will.”

*Next we speak with music director Daniel Meyer and violinist/administrator Nancy Patterson.*

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