

Cleveland Chamber Music Society 75th birthday party (part two)

By Mike Telin



The Cleveland Chamber Music Society will continue its 75th anniversary with performances of Dmitri Shostakovich's Quartets Nos. 10 through 12 on April 29, and Nos. 13 through 15 on April 30, performed by the Jerusalem Quartet — violinists Alexander Pavlovsky and Sergei Bresler, violist Ori Kam, and cellist Kyril Zlotnikov. (Photo by Ron Werman)

The 7:30 pm concerts will be held in Gartner Auditorium at the Cleveland Museum of Art. James Wilding will give pre-concert lectures at 6:30 pm before each event. Tickets are available [online](#). Click [here](#) for more information and to view a full schedule of events.

CCMS's concerts would not be possible without the dedicated volunteers who have kept the well-oiled machine operating for 75 years. I had the pleasure of speaking to Board President Fern Jennings and Chair of the Programming Committee Steve Somach.



Following her retirement as Director of Music at First Unitarian Church of Cleveland, Fern Jennings looked forward to enjoying more of Cleveland's vibrant classical music scene.

“As a church musician I was mostly involved with choral and organ concerts,” Jennings said during a telephone conversation. Although she and her husband were longtime attendees of The Cleveland Orchestra, chamber music was something of a new thing to her. “I started regularly attending Chamber Music Society concerts and that gave me a whole new genre to

explore. I liked the connection that the players had with the music and I enjoyed watching the interactions between the musicians.”

Soon Jennings was invited to serve on the CCMS board, something she said provided her with a niche in music, in addition to being a performer. “Doing something on the administrative side seemed to fit,” she said, adding that she found the organization particularly attractive because of the many great people running it. “It’s largely a volunteer-led organization with only one part-time person — who is wonderful and keeps everything going.”

It wasn’t long before Jennings was elevated to board secretary, and in 2020 she assumed the role of president. “It’s a job I can focus on and I’m happy to do it,” she said.

Jennings has always been impressed with CCMS’s ability to attract the very best national and international chamber music ensembles. She’s quick to point out that it’s due to the leadership of the program committee. “I’m not really involved with that — I defer to the people who have been doing that for a long time, and who certainly know much more about it than I do.”

When looking back over 75 years, Jennings is amazed by the impressive group of soloists and ensembles that CCMS has brought to town. “When I look at the pictures, I think, ‘Oh, I would have liked to be here for that quartet or that concert must have been amazing.’”

Jennings noted that as a presenter CCMS is fortunate to be in a city that can boast a long and deep classical music tradition beginning with The Cleveland Orchestra and continuing with many excellent Northeast Ohio orchestras and ensembles. “You could practically go to something every day of the week if you wanted to.”

Regarding the Jerusalem Quartet’s Shostakovich quartet cycle, Jennings said he was a brilliant composer. “I find it amazing that he was able to write this fabulous music with the constraints that were put on him by the government. I hope people will come and enjoy it. They will also get a bit of an idea of what it was like for someone who was working under such an autocratic regime, especially in our current climate.”

Steve Somach



Mike Telin: How long have you been involved with Cleveland Chamber Music Society?

Steve Somach: For probably 30 years now. At first I didn't have a specific function, but I joined the program committee in the first few years. I had the good fortune of becoming the chair of the committee around 2000. So it's been about 25 years.

We have a group of about seven people and we function very democratically. We keep an ongoing roster of groups that we're interested in and we have a voting process every season to decide our priorities. It ends up being kind of a jigsaw puzzle with scheduling because groups only have certain dates that they're available, so we can't just pick our top seven, invite them and expect it all to work. There is a little jockeying to get everything to fall into place.

MT: How has the selection process changed over the years?

SS: When I started, managers would send CDs of their groups in the mail all the time. We listened to them during meetings but given the volume of material that we had to consider, we only had very short periods of time to do that.

Things have not changed very much, but how we listen has changed. With digital media, it's possible for all the members of the program committee to listen to a number of artists at home, and not just have three or four minutes to listen and come up with an on-the-spot decision.

People can spend hours listening to these groups and make thoughtful and informed decisions. So I think it's changed for the better and when we operate in this way the meetings are far more efficient. We don't meet in person quite as much but we communicate a lot by email.

MT: Why did you want to join the programming committee?

SS: I love listening and being able to participate in the selection of groups, which I feel pretty passionate about, and that was something that was attractive to me right out of the gate. So when I had an opportunity to join that committee I took it immediately.

MT: What first drew you to CCMS?

SS: I grew up with chamber music. My father was a professional violinist before he went to medical school. And from the time I was in high school, we played chamber music at home with friends and family members.

I enjoy playing and I love live music, particularly chamber music because it's so intimate. And to be able to participate in this way is really meaningful for me.

MT: You've lived in Cleveland for quite a few years.

SS: I came here for part of my training in 1991 and then ended up settling here permanently in 1995.

MT: Did you attend Chamber Music Society events right away?

SS: Almost immediately. I was doing medical training as a resident, so the schedule was tight. And I had two young children but still managed to attend some of the Chamber Music Society offerings in the first couple of years I was here.

MT: You don't limit yourself to chamber music, I see you and Martha at many concerts.

SS: We squeeze in as much as we can. We follow calendars of all different presenting organizations in the entire area and we try to target dates for the coming season. But fortunately or unfortunately, Cleveland has so many wonderful offerings you just can't possibly go to everything.

MT: Moving on to the Shostakovich Quartet cycle. The Jerusalem Quartet has performed on the series many times: why did you choose their Shostakovich cycle to celebrate your 75th anniversary?

SS: A number of things had to fall into place. But when we looked at the details, it seemed like the stars lined up and it was absolutely meant to be.

Starting off, the Jerusalem Quartet are celebrating their 30th anniversary. And we discovered them very early on and they have performed for us multiple times over the last 20 years.

And it turns out that this season is not only their 30th anniversary and our 75th anniversary, it is also the 50th anniversary of the death of Shostakovich. Personally I had experienced a portion of their Shostakovich cycle at Lincoln Center in 2013. They brought the house down, so I've had this project on my radar. All these things came together and we decided to pursue the opportunity.

MT: And your decision to present them in Gartner Auditorium?

SS: We were aware that the museum was open to community partnerships. And we had looked into a number of venues, but this was an opportunity to go to a new space and

still be able to secure all of the dates that we wanted. It's no small task to have the same venue for five dates in ten days.

MT: Do you have any memories you'd care to share?

SS: I could give you a couple, like the Takács Quartet performing the Bartók cycle in two sequential nights. That was pretty inspiring.

The Takács also did a performance with a Hungarian folk ensemble called Muzsikás and Marta Sebestyén back in 2008. That was so instructive and helped to understand the context for Bartók's quartets.

I have also found the vocal recitals to be really inspiring. Experiencing them live in an intimate setting is so much more enjoyable than listening to a recording. And the voice is the ultimate instrument.

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