

The Legacy of ART: a conversation with violinist Mari Sato

by Mike Telin



Founded by Chris Haff-Paluck in 1991 with a mission to enhance the quality and diversity of life in Tremont by providing the fine arts with a greater presence in its neighborhood, Arts Renaissance Tremont has played an important role in creating community and fostering a greater appreciation for the arts through accessible artistic programs.

Since her passing on April 25, 2020, the organization has experienced some setbacks, but this season, Arts Renaissance Tremont (ART) has returned to its founding home at Pilgrim Church UCC, and launched its 34th season.

On Sunday, May 17 at 3:00 pm, Arts Renaissance Tremont will present A Legacy of ART: Honoring Chris Haff Paluck. Performers include the Amici String Quartet, guitarist Jason Vieaux, and The Cleveland Orchestra Bass Quartet, and violinist Jason Yu. The concert is free.

I caught up violinist Mari Sato by phone and began our conversation by asking her when she first met Chris Haff Paluck.

Mari Sato: I first met her when I was in high school at the Encore School for Strings, I believe it was 1989. I'm not sure what her role was, but it was administrative. I'd see her every time I went to pick up my mail. She helped me orient myself there. She was a really kind presence.

Mike Telin: What was your first experience with Arts Renaissance Tremont?

MS: Believe it or not, it was as an audience member. When Chris first started working at CIM, she told me about her series, and invited me to attend. So I went, and thought it was a beautiful space, which it still is. I was quite amazed at the audience turnout. It was really nice to see another side of Chris, and I could tell it was something that meant a lot to her.

Her role at CIM was coordinating outreach for all the students, which was another passion of hers, and she did it very well. She worked tirelessly to connect students with nursing homes or schools. And it was part of her responsibility to help the Cavani Quartet perform at area schools that were underserved. And we had a great working relationship with her.

MT: How often did the Cavani play on the series?

MS: A few times. And after she passed, Cavani took on the responsibility of running the series. But that was after I had left the Quartet so I was not involved.

MT: Arts Renaissance was such a passion of Chris's, as was the Tremont neighborhood.

MS: I don't know what the neighborhood was like in 1991 when she started the series but now I can't imagine Tremont without the series. Now it's such a trendy and artsy neighborhood with all those cool restaurants and I'm sure the series contributed to the revitalization of that area.

MT: When did you join the Amici Quartet?

MS: Two years ago, and I'm delighted that they asked me. When Takako Masame decided to retire from the Orchestra, she also retired from playing the violin. She's still so close to the quartet and is going to come to the performance. She's been so kind to me and even lent me some of her music.

I'm very grateful to continue the legacy of the Amici Quartet. They've been together for a very long time, there's such history there and they didn't want to disband once Takako left — they still have music they want to play.

It's been another wonderful journey for me. I was worried that I wouldn't be able to play quartets after I departed from Cavani, but luckily for me that is not true. They're a wonderful quartet.

MT: I understand that Amici will be playing Barber's String Quartet on Sunday: Why did you select that work to commemorate Chris?

Mari Sato: It's such an iconic piece and seemed like a natural choice for remembering someone. It's so sorrowful, meditative, but it leaves you with some hope at the end.

MT: Do you have any special memory of Chris that you would like to share?

MS: I don't have a specific memory, but when I think about Chris, I recall the many times that I would need to see her and she was always in her office. That woman worked from the early in the morning to late at night, and then somehow you'd see her at a retirement community. She seemed to be everywhere at the same time. And you'd think, how the heck is that possible?

She was a selfless person. She just wanted to connect us all with the venues that wanted to support classical music and to give students opportunities to perform. She was a true community builder and I really miss her presence. She gave so much to all of us. That's what I remember about her.

MT: Is there anything else you would like people to know about Chris?

MS: Basically what I said about her being a wonderful connector and community builder. And in her very quiet way she was so nurturing as well. I know that over the years that she just kept cultivating these relationships with the students, and they would always come back to her — the people that she looked after over the years. I think we're all going to witness that at the concert.

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