

President's Review
2023-2024 Friends of Music
Annual Meeting: July 2, 2024

2023 – 2024 Friends of Music Concert Series

October 7 and 8, 2023 The Poulenc Trio

November 4 & 5, 2023 *Mysteries, Marvels and Mischief*, Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra

February 17, 2024 *Winter Moonlight*, Two Rivers Woodwind Quintet

March 9 and 10, 2024 *The Brandenburgs are Coming Over!*, Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra

May 18 and 19, 2024, *The Friends go Fishing!*, Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra

This past year has been full of great music, exciting growth in our educational outreach, and a fair amount of (continuing) experimentation to probe and meet audience tastes and desires. Once again, we saw Jed Gaylin, our Music Director and Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra Conductor, play multiple roles at the podium and on the piano. His skills at both are much appreciated and drew many bravos. We also enjoyed hosting two very talented guest artists, violinist Irina Muresanu in November and mezzo soprano Monica Reinagel in May. Each received much acclaim for their skillful and nuanced performances. The season also included multiple selections in which our principal musicians were featured as soloists. As we have been told many times, the Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra may be small in some ways, but the sound achieved is large and terrific. It is a gem to many, drawing respect for a level of quality and expertise far beyond what most expect to find outside of major metropolitan cities. Small wonder that musicians and visitors alike enjoy what this orchestra offers to the Eastern Panhandle.

Putting on great concerts is only one of the things we do at Friends of Music. As I looked back at our achievements and challenges this past year, I thought it might be helpful to explain all that goes into developing and maintaining an arts organization like this one. To be clear, we are more than a performance venue. We see ourselves as an outlet that serves a special audience of music lovers and strengthens the role that music plays in the community. By working to support music education in local schools, we are seeking to benefit the lives of children and their teachers. We know that music helps to develop learning skills and for some, music might become an avocation or a major hobby. We also hope our efforts will enhance the community more broadly and engender a love of music that builds performing arts audiences of the future.

None of this would be possible without the hard work of a very talented board. My hats go off to them for steadfast participation, superb insights and great decision-making. I also want to commend the incredible generosity of so many individuals, sponsors, advertisers and foundations who support us, including the WV Department of Arts, Culture and History. Without this largesse, we would not have the wherewithal to attract so many fine musicians – and ticket prices would be well beyond reach. To be sure, we believe that seeing our musicians prosper is critical to our success and very important to maintaining the cultural vitality and economic dynamism of this region.

The following review focuses on some of the key factors which our board sees as guiding principles to build and maintain the organization. It highlights recent progress, but also notes some of the challenges we face as a non-profit in a rapidly changing music performance arena. A more complete picture of our goals is contained in the Long-Range Plan and Guiding Principles which our board developed and updates routinely.

Growing and maintaining our audience is perhaps our highest priority. Like many arts organizations, we want to broaden our audience among area residents as new people come to the area. We also must contend with a cohort of early Friends of Music supporters leaving the area. While the region is witnessing an influx of residents, relatively few newcomers have the time or inclination to get involved locally. There is much written about the way audiences and congregations now see their participation as “transactional,” they want to enjoy the experience when they have time, yet not be involved in maintaining ongoing operations of an organization. As such, we are working on several fronts related to programming, publicity and outreach, especially to younger people. While we will welcome volunteer participation in committees and on the board, we are also encouraging more folks to volunteer their time and energy, in whatever increments might suit their schedules. Ushering at concerts, setting up the stage, or serving refreshments at rehearsals are examples of distinct activities that don’t require much time, yet make a meaningful difference.

To maintain our attractiveness and vitality, we continue to view quality of the music we offer as paramount, and we continually work to make attendance as pleasurable as possible. The option to attend concerts at night or at matinees is very popular and now embedded in our operations. The musicians also like it; they get to perform twice for the same number of rehearsals and often achieve new heights in their playing as a result. We recognize, however, that the extra performances increase the complexity of operations and require more staffing, not to mention more contract fees and travel reimbursement to musicians.

Now that we offer two performances of each orchestra concert, other trade-offs must be considered and addressed. One is loss of cohesion as our audience has been split in two. Friends of Music has long been seen as a “family” and we don’t want to lose the sense of intimacy that has brought people together. This year, we introduced pre-concert talks

(before evening performances) in place of the Lunch with Friends event and believe this change will prove beneficial.

At the same time, we recognize that the venues open to us have some shortcomings. No one place has all the necessary ingredients: the excellent piano, clear sight-lines, comfortable seating, nearby parking, etc. But from survey responses we know that acoustics are critically important to most attendees, and churches are perhaps our best, if only, alternative. After all, chamber music was written for churches and small halls, and naturally sounds best in those venues.

This past year we tried two new venues – Shipley Hall at Shepherd University and Zion Episcopal Church in Charles Town – and will employ them again next season. The reviews have been mostly positive, but some questions remain, especially about asking listeners to travel to Charles Town. And safety is something we also care about, with tiered steps in a theater-style venue posing challenges. We are working to better understand all the variables at play and to optimally resolve any inherent tensions as we consider the venue options in our area.

Similarly, we have been working to make sure that concert offerings meet the range of tastes and preferences of our audience. In our Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra concerts this season, we highlighted the considerable talents of our principal musicians. Featuring them as soloists and also pairing them with guest artists brought much acclaim. The musicians clearly liked playing the music chosen by Jed or that they themselves suggested. There is always an interesting theme (generally captured by a catchy title) and a mix of both familiar and new pieces. Survey responses are exceedingly positive, with very few complaints and with several folks saying they can't even think of negatives. This season's Woodwind Quintet concert was very well-received, too, but attendance no doubt suffered when the original performance date was cancelled due to snow. Next season we will bring back the String Quartet, but have arranged for a January afternoon concert date since possible slippery conditions are easier to handle by day.

Friends of Music acts carefully to safeguard its limited financial resources. We want to keep ticket prices from rising and will continue to seek as much external funding as possible. Our membership model helps us know in advance that we have a core audience which provides reliable funding from subscriptions. Funding from membership and individual ticket sales totaled nearly \$28,000 this season. We also have a wonderful base of advertisers, and some growth in the number of corporate sponsors. Advertising and corporate sponsorship funding totaled nearly \$13,000. Funding received from the state Department of Arts, Culture and History is critical, and we are blessed to have additional foundations supporting our work, including the Ecolab Foundation, Nora Roberts Foundation and the Marion Parker Lewis Foundation. Grants received from foundations this year totaled \$37,650. Another matching challenge this year brought in some \$47,475 in individual donations. This outpouring of support is gratifying and demonstrates this community's commitment to sustaining the organization.

To keep the overall concert season within a budget that we think is reasonable, we continue to offer small ensembles intermixed with orchestra performances, sometimes with guest artists involved as well. All in all this year, we did well, as total income was over budget and our expenses were below budget. Our balances on hand as we head into the 25th Friends of Music season look good. We are earning significant interest from a CD that represents funding reserves, and we might even increase the amount in reserves come fall.

Outreach is another matter we continue to address, especially regarding attracting younger attendees and audiences for the future. Offering mini-grants to music teachers for enhancing their curricula and materials, and scholarships to rising seniors has met with great acclaim in the local press. In response to growing numbers of applicants, this year we awarded 20 mini-grants (the largest number ever) and four scholarships. The online application forms have been refined over time, and the process utilizes some of the back-room system enhancements developed for concert ticketing, etc.

The Scott Beard Internship position has also been refined and brought much benefit to us and to this year's student, Gabby Tedeschi. At her suggestion, we have opened an Instagram account that will be maintained by next year's Intern, Matthew Jagela. We hope this will help us reach out to more people and especially younger attendees, broadly publicizing the free or reduced rate attendance that teachers, students and their parents now enjoy. Such attendance is building, but more slowly than hoped, and this new outreach mechanism may prove very valuable. Partnerships with other arts organizations are important and we appreciate the mutually traded ads that appear in our programs and theirs.

In closing, a final word about our board and staff is warranted. There is no doubt in my mind that Friends of Music has come a long way since the days it only offered one or two concerts a year. Steadfast participation by board members has been key throughout these last 24 years, and our one-step-at-a-time decision making has brought steady growth. We are delighted to have brought on two new board members and will be seeking more this coming year. And we have done much to enhance our use of technology and internal operations so that board membership is not burdensome. As a group, we are mindful that even a very active board can only do so much; in fact, our most recent successes would not have been possible without the work of dedicated staff. Administrator Sherry Sykes may appear calm and happy most all the time, but behind the scenes she juggles many demanding tasks while giving the impression that her work is easy. Nothing could be further from the truth, and I'm most grateful to her and to my fellow board members for the privilege of serving an organization that now represents so much to this community. We have come a long way together, and with the strong encouragement of so many individuals - including members, donors and attendees, and other supporters as well - our future looks very bright. We hope next year will bring many opportunities to build on all that has come before as we celebrate our 25th season.