A Tale of Two Presenters

By George Gelles

In the constellation of our city's musical organizations, two groups shine with particular brightness. Both bring to Seattle superlative artists, though they focus on opposite ends of the stylistic spectrum. What truly sets this pair apart, however, is that they are volunteer efforts to the core, run by the best talent that money can't buy.

The Ladies Musical Club and the Early Music Guild are expressions of different ages and stages in Seattle's evolution. The former was founded in 1891—it is the uncontested dowager of our performing arts sponsors—and the latter didn't appear until 1977. While the Club has always focused its attention on glamorous headliners of the broadest appeal, the Guild has chosen to specialize in the periods known collectively as 'early music,' a repertory that stretches from approximately 1000 to 1800. In their differing interests, one presenter happily complements the other.

Both, however, address a common concern: how do you provide a city such as ours with concert artists and ensembles of the first rank? Concert production is an intricate business, involving a wide range of artistic, management, and interpersonal skills. Challenges that must be met by a sponsoring organization include selecting artists who will offer a well-balanced season; matching their availability with the availability of concert halls, and negotiating contracts with both; printing tickets and program books; marketing the concerts through print and electronic media; providing hospitality to the visiting artists; and what is ultimately most important, running a profitable enterprise. Involvement in the arts is no license for a group to lose money. If ticket receipts don't cover the costs of production—and they rarely, if ever, do—then fundraising skills must be found to keep at a distance the specter of deficits. For meeting these challenges so ably through the years, both the Guild and the Club can be proud.

The Ladies Musical Club claims a lineage that reaches back to the last century. In March 1891, just two years after the fire that razed and ruined the city, a Mrs. George W. Bacon invited a group of women to her home. Twenty-four were in attendance, and their agenda was "to stimulate the development of musical activity in the community."

It must have been an exceptional gathering. Musical talent was a requisite. Among the ladies, for example, was Mrs. Frederick Churchill, née Martha Blanka, who had studied piano with the charismatic Franz Liszt in Weimar. Miss Blanka had been touring the U.S. when she met the Seattle doctor she later married, and Club legend credits her with setting the high musical standards the ladies since have aimed to maintain.

Six months after the inaugural meeting, the Club was in operation with a roster of 50. Among the earliest members was a singer, Mrs. M. A. Gottstein, a San Franciscan by birth and a New Yorker by professional training, who is given credit for birthing and bringing up an annual concert series by visiting artists. Mrs. Gottstein was formidable. For three decades, until death cut short her tenure, she was the Club's executive secretary, thus running the show. In an informal history of the group's first 50 years, a former archivist admits: "When I say that the Club presented or managed concerts, I really mean that Mrs. Gottstein did, because she was our one-woman committee and musical financier. She was helped by the Board of Trustees, of course, but she did the work."

And what work she did. Single-handedly, it seems, she brought all the greats to Seattle during the century's first three decades. In 1900, the series inaugural season, for instance, one of four attractions was the legendary Teresa Carreño—"the Amazon of the Piano." The Chicago Symphony appeared the following year, and these artists were followed by a matchless list of luminaries. Vocalists included Lillian Nordica, Ernestine Schumann-Heink, Emma Eames, Marcella Sembrich, Olive Fremstad, Luisa Tetrazzini, Amelita Galli-Curci, and Adele Sandell. Among the keyboard virtuosi were Josef Hofmann, Moriz Rosenthal, and Ferruccio Busoni. Kreisler, Elman, and Ysaye led the violinists.

But if Mrs. Gottstein outdid herself, it was...

Though the Club still imports artists of impeccable credentials, it's probably impossible nowadays for the group to present such stellar seasons. Perhaps interest in recitals has abated. Perhaps the mainstream has been diluted with artists whose playing is less than transcendent. Certainly the most popular artists—the Pavarottis and Sutherlands and Horowitzes and Sterns—have priced themselves out of all but the wealthiest markets.

One certainty is that competition is now far fiercer than in the past. Violinist Peggy Bardarson, a member of the Club since 1956 and currently its concert manager (and concertmistress of the Seattle Philharmonic), notes that "The whole performing world has changed drastically in the last few years in Seattle. There's a tremendous amount of performing now that wasn't around just a few years ago. It's very competitive. It used to be just us, the Opera and the Symphony. But we've seen such a flowering of everything."

Yet despite this new profusion of performances, the Club still performs a valuable service. Its Artist Series presents four noteworthy attractions each year, for which there is a core audience of approximately 400 subscribers. This season's series includes appearances by cellist Lynn Harrell, pianist Cecile Licad, soprano Jan DeGaetani with pianist Gilbert Kalish, and the New Arts Trio. Though next season's schedule can't as yet be announced, it is likely to include a vocal soloist, two pianists, and an instrumental ensemble. In addition, the Club offers the public a free monthly informal brown-bag concert at the Seattle Public Library's main branch; a musical at the end of the monthly meeting of the Club's active members; and a fall gala by the Club's own members.

If the caliber of its visiting artists is somewhat less consistent than in its glory days, the Club has certain aspects that in all likelihood will never change. Membership is still limited—250 ladies at present belong—and auditions precede acceptance. A former president, Lucille Linden, explained that the Club attracts "definitely quite a few people who are on their way up" and that the auditions, conducted by a panel of pedagogues and performers, are "quite a stiff situation."

While earlier in its history the Club maintained a high civic profile—it gave grants or gifts to numerous worthy institutions, including Children's Orthopedic Hospital, Cornish Institute, the Seattle Symphony, and even the City of Seattle—its primary purpose at present is to present the Artistic Series. The Club's budget for this season's series is approximately $40,000, and income from ticket revenues and donations is supplemented by the return on a modest endowment. "It's not large," Mrs. Linden reports, "but we invest it wisely." Remarkably, there is no accumulated deficit, a fact to be proud of after 93 years.

In its early years the Ladies Musical Club brought to Seattle a roster of great singers that included the legendary Ernestine Schumann-Heink. Photo courtesy of the Ladies Musical Club and the Museum of History and Industry.

While the Ladies Musical Club calls the riches of a traditional repertory—its artists generally perform favorites from the past 200 years—the Early Music Guild explores for treasures of a lesser common sort. Early music refers to the vast body of work composed in the Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque and early Classical eras, or roughly from 1000 to 1800. Though this corpus was created over an 800-year span, it is unified by a contemporary sensibility that demands authenticity of performance style, appreciates the useful lessons of scholarship and, most importantly, insists on an emotional integrity that makes readings of this repertory vividly alive. Whether performers are dealing with Machaut or Monteverdi, Bussinos or Bach, the most skillful early music artists give their audiences an experience that few traditional symphonic or smaller ensembles can equal for sheer elegance and emotional probity.

Though the Guild was founded a mere seven years ago, for a variety of reasons it couldn't have been born any earlier. One reason is that professional interest in early music is a relatively recent phenomenon. It's true that in the first decades of the century there was an antiquarian interest in early music, best exemplified by Arnold Dolmetsch and his dynasty, and that somewhat later the great pedagogue Nadia Boulanger led performances (which, happily, were recorded) of Monteverdi's works that were at once stylistically lushly baroque and weirdly, paradoxically, right—for all her faults, Boulanger was a marvelous musician and a compelling conductor. But it's equally true that only in the past two or three decades has early music been seriously cultivated by a younger generation of musicians as a rich and fertile field. Performers now can choose to specialize in early music with a reasonable expectation of earning at least part of their living thereby. And for the first time they have a host of role models. Among early music's superstars are harpsichordist/organist Gustav Leonhardt, violinist Jaap Schroeder, cellist Anner Bylsma, and recorder and flute virtuoso Frans Bruggen. Each of these artists in his own way is the equal of any Heifetz or Rubinstein.

Another reason for the blossoming of early music is that a broad new public has discovered its delights. It's impossible to say precisely who the early music audience is composed of. But attendance at these concerts suggests that early music aficionados are primarily interested in the musical substance of these concerts and not in their value as social events. There's an intensity here that is rarely felt at other performances, and you sense that the audience knows the performers, which in fact is usually the case. Not only are recordings, and the personalities who made them, much discussed and debated by the early music coterie, but at virtually every concert there will be members of the audience who have studied with the artists appearing on the stage. It's something of an extended family, this early music scene, and there's nothing quite like it in its intelligent informality.

Performers, of course, sparked this interest and intimacy, and for generations of listeners who had little opportunity to hear music outside the mainstream of the 18th and 19th centuries, this repertory must have been a revelation. Certainly audiences for early music have grown exponentially. Ensembles that didn't exist a decade ago now give regular series—one thinks of New York's Concert Royal, Boston's Camerata, or San Francisco's Baroque Orchestra of the West—and because of this public support, certain American cities have become centers for early music scholarship and performance. Seattle can count itself among the front rank of these towns. As Jeffrey Gray observed in an overview of the present scene published last spring in the Weekly, "There are musicians and instrument builders of international reputation living here, an avid and well-informed population of listeners, and a plethora of early music groups...Seattle now has as much or more early music activity as any other city of its size in the United States."

Through its varied activities, the Early Music Guild sustains and nourishes these groups and their audiences. The Guild serves several functions. Most visible to the general public is its International Series. Now in its seventh year, this series annually brings to Seattle a selection of the finest early music ensembles and soloists, consciously striking a balance among the various periods. In the current season, for instance, the Medieval will be represented this month by a Cologne-based ensemble that has stum (continued on page 24)
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ningly revived the sacred and secular music of French troubadours, German Minnesänger, and English friars and mystics. Renaissance music was represented in December by the third Seattle visit of The Hilliard Ensemble, a British vocal quartet whose performances of 16th-century repertory evoke an adulation once associated exclusively with booby-singers. Baroque music is the specialty of the outstanding German recording ensemble Musica Antiqua Köln and of lutenist Hopkinson Smith. Scholarship has in recent years expanded the concept of early music to include the early Classical era, and the final concert of the Guild's season will feature a masterpiece from that era: baritone Max van Egmond and fortepianist Malcolm Bilson in a recital of Schubert's great song cycle "Die schöne Müllerin." As recordings have taught us, scores from the Classical era can sound remarkably fresh and vivid when authentic performance practices remove the overlay of stale stylistic traditions.

In addition to the series, the Guild this month scores another coup with an extra-event harpsichord recital by the old master of early music, Gustav Leonhardt, on February 9.

For a group that has assumed such importance in the musical life of our city, the Guild has a genesis that is modest indeed. John Gibbs, music librarian at the University of Washington, tells how the group was born at a lunch with two other prominent figures on the early music scene, Randall McCarty, a harpsichordist, organist and instructor at Pacific Lutheran University, and Jerome Kohl, a musicologist and recorder teacher who was at that time a doctoral candidate at the University of Washington's School of Music. "At that point in time," Gibbs recalls, "there were a lot of local ensembles with no place to play. Also, there was no opportunity for people to hear really fine international ensembles. So the three of us got together and got up a list of names of everybody with an early music ensemble or in some way identified with early music. That's what started the ball rolling."

Each of these early music superstars is in his own way the equal of any Heifetz or Rubinstein.

The Guild's first international attraction of that 1977-78 season was an appearance by English countertenor James Bowman and lutenist Robert Spencer. Gibbs, McCarty and Kohl had found a demand that needed filling. Such was the Guild's success that the following season five concerts were presented on the International Series, including performances by Gustav Leonhardt, Anner Bylsma, and the Hilliard Ensemble. In the third and fourth seasons, delighted audiences heard many more of their recorded idols live in Seattle for the first time. Seattle or Northwest debuts included the excellent harpsichordist Colin Tiney; the young Dutch virtuoso of Quadro Hottettere; and that Parma group all Baroquenaks speak of with awe and reverence, the Kuijken Quartet.

By its fifth season in 1981-82, there was no doubt that the Guild's International Series had become a permanent fixture in town, or that its budget had grown impressively. The $2000 expenditure of 1977 had grown to $18,000. Ticket income in 1981-82 was a remarkable $18,859, and this illustrates a trend of the Guild—through the years it has shown a fine sense of fiscal responsibility. Not only is it deficit-free, but it has managed to amass a modest surplus that serves as a financial cushion against unexpected difficulties.

For the current season the Guild is operating with a projected balanced budget of $35,600. Of this amount, approximately $23,000 is used to produce the International Series. The remainder is spent on fundraising, administration, a monthly newsletter called Musical, and on the Guild's Assistance Program, the other crucial part of its activities.

Since its inception, the Guild has embraced as one of its prime purposes the encouragement of local artists. This encouragement now takes the form of modest financial underwriting for concerts by Seattle-based performers. Naomi Shiff, the Guild's current president, explains that under this program, "the musicians are getting what they need—a little help up front." The Assistance Program in effect takes the place of the Guild's Informal Series, which in the Guild's first seasons av-
eraged nine concerts a year. Over time, the production of fourteen concerts per season—five on the International Series, nine on the Informal Series—became more of a burden than the Guild could comfortably assume with its volunteer help.

Reviewing these earlier years, it is impossible not to acknowledge the enormous efforts made by violinist Stanley Ritchie and harpsichordist Elisabeth Wright. This husband-and-wife team, known professionally as Duo Gemini, was ubiquitous. Either in tandem, or in solo recitals by Ms. Wright, they provided an almost non-stop series of concerts, the sort of marathon few cities are fortunate enough to experience. Unfortunately, however, the pair have left Seattle for the Midwest, where they teach and perform at Indiana University.

For next season the Guild's plans are typically ambitious. Tony Cantrick, a harpsichordist who chairs the Selection Committee, reports that, in this Bach/Handel/ Scarlatti/Schütz anniversary year, the Guild's season will focus heavily on Baroque. Already signed at this writing are cellist Anner Bylsma in a program of Bach cello suites and the London Baroque Ensemble. Negotiations are under way with the fine Trio Sonnerie, which specializes in French music, with the Boston Camerata and, most tantalizingly, with a package of 14 artists making up Concert Royal and the New York Baroque Dance Company. The last attraction merits special attention. Catherine Turcoy, who heads the ensemble, is an artist of special loveliness, and under her guidance the company has won raves from critics and audiences both here and abroad. Says Cantrick: "I'm confident that we'll pull off a nice event with that."

The Guild, then, like the Ladies Musical Club, has been impressively successful. For all their success, though, both groups face some unique challenges. As volunteer organizations, they must rely on an endless supply of committed and able individuals to guide them and do their work. Thus far they have found the needed leadership, but as goals expand and visions grow, they may well need professional assistance. Lack of continuity from one season to the next is the bugbear of all volunteer organizations. Improvisation is a fine art indeed, but should it be the basis of arts management?

Looking at their records, the local funding community should confidently anticipate continued smooth operation and strong performance from both the Ladies Musical Club and the Early Music Guild. Yet, while it's impossible not to admire the individuals who invest so much time and effort in running these groups, would more conventional, and more broadly representative, boards of directors, with small professional staffs to implement their wishes, not be more appropriate for organizations with an eye on the future? Could such a transition be made without altering the images of the groups themselves?

Finding answers to these questions will not be easy. Meanwhile, we can only salute their seasons of achievement and acknowledge their accomplishments.

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