

THE MILL VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REVIEW

SPRING 2015



A Musical Chamber



Music thrives in Mill Valley, all kinds, so it's not surprising that we are home to an organization that brings chamber music from all over the world to our community.

BY **TINA KUN AND ABBY WASSERMAN**

The Mill Valley Chamber Music Society (MVCMS) has settled handily into a groove carved by previous musical groups, including the Outdoor Art Club's Mill Valley Concert Series in the late 1940s, classical concerts at Stolte Grove, and Candlelight Concerts at Brown's Hall. There was also the splendid Marin Music Fest at the Mt. Tamalpais Methodist Church (1980-1992).

Of these, the Chamber Music Society has had the greatest staying power. Audiences have come to expect the highest quality with each new series—five concerts by internationally renowned ensembles, as well as a concert by young musicians and an Outreach Program to the schools.

MVCMS expresses the long-time distinctive character of Mill Valley. Residents from the start have been known as bohemian, nature-loving, simple, direct, and arty. Here, captains of industry lived next to their handymen in comfort and respect. This egalitarian spirit is honored by the Chamber Music Society, which tries hard to keep ticket prices affordable and resists the tendency to go upscale or become exclusive in any way. The board of directors is ever on the watch to make this open spirit evident. The word "society" was adopted not to describe a closed group but, on the contrary, to echo the first definition of the word in the Oxford English Dictionary: "Association with one's fellow men esp. in a friendly or intimate manner; companionship or fellowship."

The Audience

Sit towards the back of the hall at any MVCMS concert and you will be looking over a frothy sea of white hair. This audience is not young—many have been attending these concerts for decades—but the preponderance of very senior citizens does not mean that the group is in danger of losing its followers in the near future. Chamber music typically appeals to people more and more as they age and become increasingly familiar with music. New audiences will appear.

Chamber music is a revelation—a few players on a bare stage can create an even more compelling emotional journey than an opera cast and crew of hundreds. The immediacy is most striking. The music is spare but intense. Just as there is joy in a single line drawing by Matisse, artistry is clearly evident in great music created of single lines.

The advent of LPs brought chamber music to a much wider audience. In San Francisco of the 1950s and early 1960s, there were occasional chamber music performances, but nothing like today, where every week there are many to choose from. Originally there had been concern that the LP would diminish audiences, but to the contrary, it brought new knowledge and thirst for this music. And no doubt, chamber music is best heard with others. Being part of a sympathetic audience is a great experience.

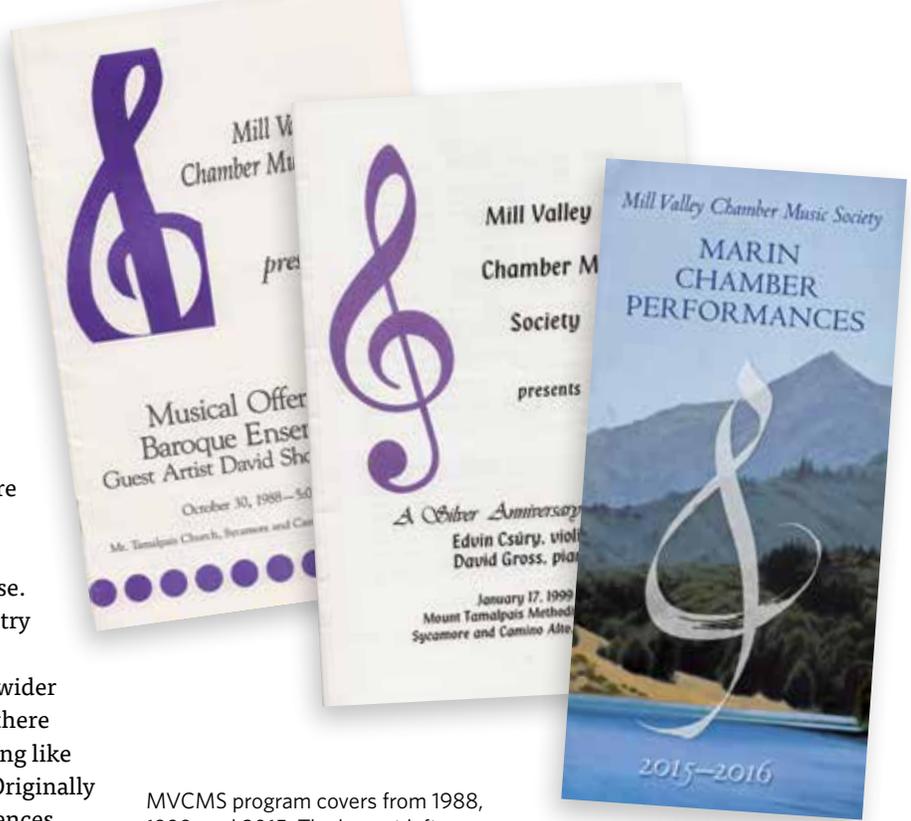
The Performance Space

It's Sunday afternoon about 4 p.m. A few cars pull into the parking lot of the Mount Tamalpais Methodist Church on Sycamore at Camino Alto. By 4:30 the parking lot is filling up. Many of the concert-goers have been devoted to this series for decades, and they know the ropes—getting there early to make sure they get their preferred seats. With seating in pews rather than individual chairs, open seating is a necessity. Most of this audience knows what to expect and they line up patiently, awaiting the opening of the doors, greeting their old friends and listening to the faint last strains of the musicians' warm-up.

Except for sightlines, the venue has many advantages—excellent acoustics in a space that accommodates an audience of about 300, an ideal size for the intimate experience of chamber music; a level entrance without steps, ample free parking, a convenient location—and a very hospitable church.

The camaraderie of the audience is extraordinary. Some have been loyally attending these programs from the very start in 1976. Music lovers would feel lucky to hear such concerts in New York or London, and yet are attending them in Mill Valley often for half the cost charged for these same groups elsewhere. This is made possible by volunteer labor and individual donors. A devoted board does as much of the work as possible, a generous audience contributes reliably, and a number of Mill Valley businesses have supported the Society by placing advertisements in the concert program.

Credit for the high quality of the performances should go mainly to the presidents of MVCMS, who negotiate the artists' contracts. Since 1985 there have been just three presidents: Nelson Foote, Larry Snyder, and Bill Horne. Musicians enjoy



MVCMS program covers from 1988, 1999, and 2015. The logo at left was designed by Rick Wachs. The one at right is by calligrapher David Brookes. Courtesy of the Lucretia Little History Room, Mill Valley Public Library.

Opposite: At the MVCMS venue, the Mt. Tamalpais Methodist Church, the audience applauds Cuarteto Casals at the close of their March 1, 2015 concert. Photo by Kim Taylor.

performing for the series and will often accept less than their usual fee, with a bit of cajoling. It helps that over the years the audiences have become known among musicians and their agents for their intense and appreciative concentration.

The Founders

The organization began as a modest effort. In 1973 David Subke, a flutist in the Oakland Symphony living in Mill Valley, set up a series of chamber music performances so that he and his friends could perform. Chamber music is probably the preference of most musicians, but many spend their lives fulfilling the rigorous duties of symphony players while rarely having the chance to perform the chamber repertoire. The performances that first year included woodwind and string ensembles directed by Subke as well as recitals by Paul Hersh, the eminent violist and pianist then on the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music and living in Mill Valley; as well as piano duo Peggy and Milton Salkind, cellist Laszlo Varga, soprano Anna Carol Dudley, and pianist Robin Sutherland. The second season was equally ambitious, but still with only scant organizational framework. At this point the Society was a performing rather than a presenting organization. It had modest help from the Mill Valley Art Commission (a small subsidy, some graphics, and a mailing address). Membership sales were small; most of the revenue came from tickets sold at the door. Often the musicians were performing only for the love of playing.

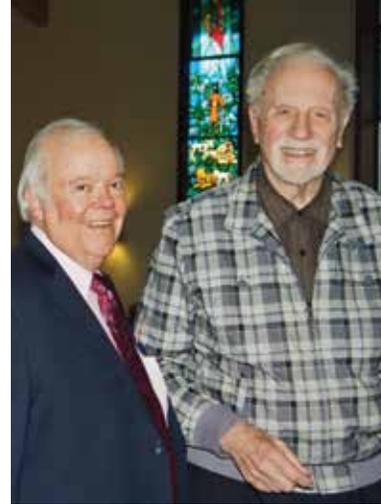
In 1976 Carolyn Bender Goldsmith agreed to take over leadership. An amateur musician who played piano, guitar, and harpsichord, she had a devoted circle of Baroque music players whose



Left: Carolyn and Richard Goldsmith, n.d. Courtesy of Paul and Karen Goldsmith. Photographer unknown.

Right: Past and current MVCMS Board Presidents Larry Snyder (R) and Bill Horne. Photo by Kim Taylor.

Far right: MVCMS Past President Nelson Foote with his Milley statuette, 1996. Foote was honored for Creative Contributions to the Community. Photo by Trubee Schock.



help she enlisted. She also brought in her good friends, Gloria and Henry Wachs. Carolyn's husband, Richard Goldsmith, was a judge and the first U.S. Magistrate for the northern district of California. He played the saxophone; his sister Phyllis was a piano prodigy. The Goldsmiths were Jewish, their political beliefs were progressive, and they were a force in Mill Valley's cultural life. When Mill Valley Center for the Performing Arts (later Marin Theatre Company) founder Sali Lieberman, an immigrant from Germany with left-wing politics, encountered resistance to his application for citizenship, Richard used his influence to intervene, and Lieberman got his papers.

Carolyn applied to the Buck Trust for a chamber music series grant, and since only non-profit organizations could qualify, she enlisted her husband's help in acquiring 501(c)(3) status. It took several years, and consequently the official establishment of the Mill Valley Chamber Music Society is dated 1979.

During the following five years the Mill Valley Chamber Music Society presented a series of concerts ranging from five to eight programs yearly. It was a homegrown affair: Carolyn and Gloria did most of the work, and the original treble clef logo was designed by Gloria's son Rick, who also set type for the first programs. Most of the music was Baroque and most of the performers were from the Bay Area. Flutists Jeanie Chandler and Bonnie Williams Lockett performed, as did the youthful Kronos String Quartet.

Tragedy struck in 1984. Carolyn and Richard Goldsmith were killed in an automobile accident, leaving the Society grieving and in turmoil. At the Temple Emanuel funeral service, landscape architect Lawrence Halprin and Mountain Play Executive Director Marilyn Smith gave eulogies. At a memorial gathering at the Outdoor Art Club, the Kronos quartet performed. The Society was saved by the work of Gloria Wachs, Agnes Oman, Bonnie Lockett, and Millicent Tomkins, with Gloria serving as president for a year followed by Millicent the next. The board appealed for volunteers at their last scheduled concert, and among the new recruits were Nelson Foote and Don Oman. In 1987, Millicent handed the presidency over to Nelson, but stayed active with the Society as chair of the artist selection committee. One of her coups was a concert featuring the young Joshua Bell and Jean Yves Thibaudet (1988).

The next crisis took place two years later, when support from the Buck Trust was terminated. A lawsuit had resulted in the creation of the Marin Community Foundation to administer the Trust, and the new entity did not choose to continue funding the Society

and many other arts non-profits. Luckily, the MVCMS board's energetic executive vice-president, Fred Taylor, appealed to all subscribers and to as many interested potential audience members as he could find, and the series was saved. The number of concerts in a season was reduced to five, and soon the Society was operating in the black, presenting artists of not only local repute but national and international fame. Nelson Foote established the smoothly working system that allows a board with limited or no experience in the music business to present concerts. He had recently retired from his professorship at the University of Chicago, and he and his wife, Geraldine, had moved to Mill Valley to be close to their daughter, Kathleen. Almost immediately he developed means to contribute to his new community, and having been previously associated with a chamber music series, he had the experience to develop a board and lead in a style of independent but cooperative work that persists to this day. The Society grew into financial stability, developed a dependably loyal contributor base, and made great advances in musical reputation.

After the 1995-96 season, Larry Snyder took over the presidency of the organization. Larry had served as president of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and more recently, chairman of the Music Department at Sonoma State University. His congenial style of leadership fostered the very cooperative and agreeable spirit that still marks operations of the board. The next and current president, Bill Horne, energetically sought extraordinary musicians to present on the series, to the point where it has achieved significant respect in the world of music. Among notable concerts over the years: Angela Hewitt (twice), Jon Nakamatsu and Jon Manasse (twice), the Prazak Quartet (twice), the Emerson Quartet, the Takacs Quartet, as well as many less well-known names who have given equally stunning performances. In 2013, on its 40th anniversary, the Mill Valley City Council, under the leadership of Mayor Andrew Berman, issued a Proclamation lauding MVCMS for its stellar performances and outreach program.

At present, the board has 15 members, led by Horne, a retired physician and resident of Scott Valley. An avid amateur pianist who has played with many professional musicians, he lends his knowledge of chamber music to many organizations, including Chamber Musicians of Northern California, San Francisco Friends of Chamber Music, and the Associated Chamber Players, a worldwide organization. Longtime MVCMS treasurer Bob Glasson does all the accounting, tax return preparation, budgeting, and paying.

He also has been liaison with the Mount Tamalpais Methodist Church, making sure that the hall is in good shape when the musicians and audience arrive, and left in equally clean condition.

The work of every member of the board is essential to the presentation of the concerts. Secretary John Cutler keeps the minutes of meetings, is responsible for advertisements in the program, and takes responsibility for Outreach Support. Joe Angiulo schedules and arranges Outreach presentations. Hana Dahl, who joined the board at age 16, is the webmaster who created the website and keeps it up-to-date, even though she's currently attending film school at the University of Southern California. Jeff Gordon monitors subscriptions and donations, a job long performed by Elsa Burton. Iyana Leveque, Artist Relations, ensures that the musicians have transportation, lodging, and the equipment they need. Betty Musser is responsible for the coffee and cookie sales at concerts, providing concert-goers with a bit of refreshment and adding to the Society's coffers. Ruth Rosen helps with ticket sales, and Liz Stone manages public relations as well as responding to telephone inquiries. Tina Kun sees to the production of concert programs and the annual brochure. All board members fill in for all the odd jobs that crop up.

Backstage Stories

There is often more behind-the-scenes drama than one might imagine for something as sedate as a musical concert. A nerve-racking situation developed some years back when a San Francisco ensemble failed to appear at the predicted hour (3:00 for warm-up). As the clock ticked, approaching 5 p.m. with no

performers in sight and the audience waiting in their seats, Nelson Foote became increasingly agitated. Finally, one of the performers arrived and nonchalantly told Nelson he could improvise something until the rest of the group got there, and to stop worrying. After that, no local groups were signed up until the board could be very sure that they took the concert seriously. Once, with just two weeks' notice, a quartet was unable to travel from Europe due to a serious illness of one of its members. Fortunately, Horne was able to book a replacement quartet from Los Angeles so that the performance could go on.

Another interesting situation evolved on the day of one of the concerts when it was discovered by the quartet during their pre-concert rehearsal that lighting was inadequate for the players to see their music properly (the ceiling lighting in the church is 30-40 feet high over the performance area). A board member made a mad dash home for stand lights. The church addressed its lighting issue before the next performance.

The sixth presentation each season for the last three decades has been the Young Artists' Concert, which is co-sponsored by the Marin Music Chest. A selected group of scholarship winners (ages 15-20) of the Music Chest's rigorous round of competitions give one of the most enjoyable musical experiences of all, astounding the audience with their musicality, technical prowess, and artistry. Hearing these young musicians each year, we anticipate a bright future for chamber music.

Tina Kun is a longtime board member of the Mill Valley Chamber Music Society. Abby Wasserman served on the MVCMS board in 1988-89.

Tuning in, Turning on



Outreach program at Mill Valley Middle School by the Premier Saxophone Quartet, March 11, 2015. The musicians are Kevin Stewart, Dale Wolford, David Henderson, and Aaron Lington.

For the last 15 years, the Outreach arm of the Mill Valley Chamber Music Society has introduced intimate ensemble music to countless children in Marin County. Each season three or four groups come to schools for presentations that combine performance with Q & A's. Some of our out-of-town presenters are willing to do this extra duty; others are local groups. We choose them carefully because many children are unexposed to chamber music and we want to make sure the music has a chance to appeal to them. The reward comes when I see them turn on to music they've never heard before or see instruments completely foreign to them.

From an early age, we should be able to listen to and love all kinds of music. Each of the 40 to 50 soloists and ensembles we've introduced to schoolchildren have offered insightful musical experiences. The most outstanding—The Turtle Island String Quartet (classical and jazz), Nuclear Whales Saxophone Orchestra (seven saxophones), Assad Brothers (duo guitarists), Hot Buttered Rum String Band (bluegrass), and Trio Voronezh (Bach to balalaikas)—have presented music in ways the children could understand, bringing them new ways of hearing and appreciating. *-Joe Angiulo*

Joe Angiulo taught music in the Mill Valley schools for 37 years,