



Cue the Orchestra

Thirty years of free classical music concerts

BY GREG DIETZ

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In 1981, a handful of string player friends led by violin teacher Samuel Applebaum gave their first performances at Seton Hall. With a focus on baroque and classical works the recitals were usually quartets, or octets if the group had the numbers.

Dubbing themselves the Society of Musical Arts, or SOMA, the group dedicated itself to bringing live classical music to our community, free of charge.

What began as an informal string quartet has since grown into a full orchestra performing three concerts a year, and though its founder has long since passed away, his dream lives on.

Outgrowing its original venue, SOMA first moved to Maplewood Town Hall; but attendance at those performances grew too large for that space. "Our last show there," says conductor Stephen Culbertson, "we must have had...well I'm not sure I should say how many, but I'm sure we were over the fire code."


The growth has been intermittent - the schedule was cut back for a few years to only one concert a year - but all that changed three years ago when Laura Papparatto became president of SOMA. "Laura is a powerhouse," says SOMA secretary and publicist Innes Borstel, one of several board members Papparatto recruited; others include Culbertson and treasurer Peggy Reynolds, who has also been responsible for finding more players for the orchestra. "Peggy knows every musician in the tri-state area," says Borstel. "She must have 500 people on her cell phone," adds Culbertson.

With the number of musicians rising, the next task was to give the orchestra a more consistent direction and a more considered musical program. To that end Papparatto brought aboard Culbertson, who earned his conductor's degree from the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki. "He's the glue that holds us all together," Borstel says. "He doesn't yell, and he can always tell who needs that extra bit of help." It was his demeanor as well as his thoughtful choice of music, she says, that kept musicians like herself coming back.

But with the orchestra increasing in size and the quality of the programs becoming more ambitious, it was only a matter of time before SOMA outgrew the town hall and relocated to St. George's Episcopal Church.

These improvements have also created some new problems. The inclusion of world-class soloists has helped attendance, but usually such soloists are paid. "And there are other expenses you don't think about," says Papparatto. "There's insurance. You have to pay ASCAP (the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers) to even play the music." She estimates that each show costs more than \$2000 to perform, a difficulty for an organization that puts

on three shows a year and doesn't charge admission for any of them. It is only through public support that SOMA can keep its doors open.

These worries have yet to daunt the group's ambition, though, and they will continue to provide classical music to Maplewood for as long as they can. They will be kicking off 2013 with a performance featuring several works by Aaron Copland in January, and in August they will be performing the world premier of a new piece by composer Roberto Sierra, written especially for SOMA. "Our plan," says Papparatto, "is to keep doing what we're doing." 

Greg Dietz has played several instruments over the years, but his greatest love will always be the piano.

