

ARTICLES

The Secret Life of Cynthia Siebert

Brian Justice •



(photo by Nathan Lang)

No wonder Kansas City's Friends of Chamber Music is so dynamic and eclectic. Consider its Founder.

What do you think of when you hear "chamber music?" Four musicians in black, playing stately and somber string compositions. Oh, so dignified and oh, what a snooze. Right?

Wrong. As wrong as can be in the hands of Cynthia Siebert, president and founder of Kansas City's Friends of Chamber Music.

In her adopted home town of Kansas City, Siebert has carved out a place for chamber music that is as dynamic and eclectic as she is. To revamp Shakespeare a bit, age cannot wither the Friends, nor custom stale its infinite variety

So, picture, instead, an Australian string orchestra playing so fast and furiously that the audience is left breathless. Or a quartet of hipsters playing a composition based on Alan Ginsberg's *Howl* to a recording of Ginsberg, himself, reading his famous poem. Or a piano virtuoso who ended his recital by playing spontaneous tribute to a recently lost friend with an elegant, simple version of Irving Berlin's *What'll I Do?* that had everyone in the Folly Theater in tears.

So who is this doyenne, anyway, and what is it about Cynthia Siebert that makes the Friends of Chamber Music the unique hotbed of creativity that it is?

"People often say that history is written backwards," she says. "It looks chaotic from the present tense. It's only when you look back that you start to see a longer line."

And in her case it's true. Siebert's personal and cultural upbringing was peripatetic. After her father, a sailing fanatic, sold the house, she and her sister spent the later part of their childhoods on a yacht with a built-in piano. Siebert was already a trained pianist and her sister was an accomplished flutist.

"She and I were inseparable," recalls Siebert, "and we played chamber music. We played every day, together."

The "home" piano had limitations. It was on a ship, after all, and to hold up against sea air and water it had one string per pen instead of the typical three, which allowed it to hold its tune better. But Siebert says it actually sounded like a cross between a piano and a clavichord, an 18th-century ancestral instrument to the piano.

"It sounded fantastic for Bach and Mozart, but horrible for the romantic literature," she said.

When the family docked, be it for a few days or a few months, the young and intrepid Siebert became adept at scouting out churches with decent pianos and asking permission to practice.

"At first they were horrified," laughs Seibert. "What? This kid is going to come in and play our piano?" When they realized I was a responsible and accomplished pianist what would invariably happen is that someone would hear me and invite me into their home. And from that point on I would practice on very fine pianos. I played a wide variety of Steinway grand pianos in the Chesapeake Bay area."

A (long-over) romance with a member of the (then) Kansas City Philharmonic brought her to Kansas City, where her proximity to the organization and the city's performing arts community prompted someone to suggest that she start a chamber music series. "I didn't know what they were thinking," she recalls. "I didn't know anyone here. But the city didn't have a professional chamber music series of any kind."

And so, she started one, and with some naiveté. "I just thought 'Oh, I will just start this and in two or three years it will have enough momentum and then I will go back to the East Coast and

But how did it?

First, the grueling and near total dedication required by a performing career. “I love to perform, but I saw how my friends lived and I realized that it’s not enough to just be accomplished on your instrument. You have to have the stamina of a bull. Physically, mentally, psychologically, and you have to put up with travel and inconveniences, exhaustion, and everyone expects you to walk off a flight, fresh as a daisy, and pour your heart out.”

That, and her respect for the chamber oeuvre. “Chamber musicians are very exposed,” she says. “The smaller the group, the stronger the players must be. Technically, musically, in every way, and also because the literature is really the most difficult ever written.”

And finally, “the extraordinarily accomplished people that this art form tends to attract.”

“Whether friends or audience members, professionals or amateurs, I’ve always been impressed by their intellect and charm and breadth of culture and education. They are well traveled, they are well read. It’s humbling. I have learned so much from these people, and they have become, in many cases, very close friends. It’s just amazing. I cannot imagine living outside of this particular community.”

The Friends of Chamber Music will celebrate its 40th anniversary this year. Visit chambermusic.org for performance schedules, tickets and information.

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