

Beyond Philadelphia borders

The Bucks County Performing Arts Center

By Susan Spevak

Spearheading a concert series is not on most of our minds when we visit our local municipal building with the intent of paying the tax bill or applying for a zoning variance. Yet in 1978 a young mother and school music teacher named Mary Borkovitz stopped in at the Lower Makefield Township Building and noticed that its large meeting room could be an ideal space for concerts.

The next step, as Ms. Borkovitz describes, was to put on a program. “It was a group of teachers who got together to play recorder as a hobby. I announced in the township newsletter that we were starting a concert series. Thirty people came, and that’s how it began.”

So was born the Lower Makefield Society for the Performing Arts, and the first concert confirmed one thing—that the space had quite decent acoustics for musical performances. Twenty-seven years later the organization, now renamed the Bucks County Performing Arts Center, has become a respected venue for musicians, and a diverse array of other performers—dancers, actors, mimes, puppeteers, and storytellers. Mary Borkovitz is its executive director.

Most concerts take place in the Lower Makefield Township Building at 1100 Edgewood Road, Yardley. Not the most elegant location—after all it is a municipal building—but nobody seems to mind. The most popular programs feature solo pianists and string quartets, but jazz and klezmer groups have also attracted good audiences. Programs feature the work of different local artists, alternating paintings with photography, woodworking, ceramics, or art glass. The name change to Bucks County Performing Arts Center reflects the growth in quality, scope, and geographic reach which now makes this performing arts venue a cultural resource for all of Bucks County, not just the township of Lower Makefield.

How would one bring an organization from those early programs to its current stature? Mary

Borkovitz says, “I had a degree in Music Education, but not Music Management. Everything I learned was through trial and error. My knowledge increased just by doing, by finding avenues of funding, attracting performers, attracting audiences.” If the use of the first-person pronoun implies that all these activities were spearheaded by a single person, this is largely accurate; the hands-on work was directed primarily by Ms. Borkovitz, and aided by an informal and devoted “working board.” A Pennsylvania Council on the Arts grant was matched by Lower Makefield Township. That funding was to support the series from the 1980s to the present.



Executive Director and founder Mary Borkovitz



Allen Krantz, guitarist

As for seeking out performers, Ms. Borkovitz continues, “I found out from the very beginning that there are just not enough venues for all the wonderful artists in the area, in the community.” Initially participating were local amateur musicians who received no fee, but

whom she regarded as “very credible and excellent performing artists.” Gradually the series was able to draw on nearby academic music departments. As the venue became known and funding became more secure, availability of performers of stature broadened.

Over the years, a Who’s Who of Philadelphia-based musicians (or those with Philadelphia roots) have performed on the series: Pianists Charles Abramovic, Marcantonio Barone, Clipper Erickson, guitarist Allen Krantz, violinist Elizabeth Pitcairn, and the Wister Quartet, most recently with David Kim (concertmaster of The Philadelphia Orchestra). From the New York area have come pianist John Novacek, flutist-storyteller Ulla Suokko, cellist Clancy Newman, and most recently Cyrus Beroukhim, violinist, with pianist Barbara Podgurski. Performers have traveled from as far as Washington State and California. A group from Alaska, calling itself the “Glacial Erratics” would have been part of the 2001--2002 season but for the events of 9/11.



Barbara Podgurski, pianist

Many aspects of running an arts organization are now delegated to a formal board of directors (which upgraded the “working board” last year although committee volunteers are still sought), but Mary Borkovitz

still retains the responsibility of selecting classical musicians to play on the series. Her criteria? “First of all,” she says, “we’re a very small operation, and I have stacks of material from people who want to play. So I will prefer people who reach out to me and

show real interest. If they can come here, meet me, and audition, that’s the quickest way I can make a decision.”

And what does she look for in a performer? “Artistry!” she says. “It’s always important to have good technical control over your instrument, but if the artistry is missing, if it’s mechanical, I’m let down.” One of her tests: “If someone is performing for me, and somewhere in the middle of it I start thinking of what I’m planning for dinner, they’ve lost me. I have to know our audience will be captivated.” Other qualifications: “You should be personable. This is an intimate setting; 120 people, not 1500. You’re interacting with people, not just standing on a stage.”



Ulla Suokko playing the birch flute

An advantage of being a small flexible organization is that there is no one formula for a successful performer and enthusiastic audience. One of the concerts featured David Zaychik and Flora Lyudina, recent émigrés from Odessa. Musical colleagues twenty-five years ago, they discovered they were both living in the Philadelphia area with their families and decided to form a violin-piano duo; one of their first performances was on the Lower Makefield Performing Arts series—to a standing-room-only crowd. The Chinese-American Philharmonic Chorus, made up

of area singers, has been a popular group.

Future grant opportunities may introduce new considerations into the selection process. An affinity for educational outreach can be a strong plus. Mary says, “Many of the granting organizations” (Pennsylvania Performing Arts on Tour, Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance) want to see outreach and new audiences, not just support a single performance. We can pursue these grants provided we find artists to incorporate into both the series and the schools.”

Once selected to perform, it is likely that a soloist or group will return on a regular basis through the years, so that each season’s calendar has a mix of series veterans along with new faces. The warm relationship built up between the performers and the Bucks County Performing Arts Center is reflected in overwhelmingly positive feedback. Musicians who have performed in venues like the Kimmel Center, Alice Tully Hall, or Weill Hall are, to a person, enthusiastic about playing in a utilitarian-looking municipal building for a warm and welcoming audience.

Says John Novacek, pianist, “Working with Mary is very rewarding; she is absolutely committed to the arts, sensitive to performers’ needs, and has a great understanding of the repertoire.” He adds,



David Kim, violinist

“I feel a real sense of support from the audience; it’s a musically sophisticated and educated group.” Says Allen Krantz, guitarist, “It’s not a glamorous setting, but it’s a very heartening experience to play there because we get wonderfully enthusiastic crowds. It’s the opposite of a formal stage, and that gives it a real intimacy.” Marcantonio Barone explains, “Nobody attends concerts here because it’s an elegant, fashionable venue. Everyone comes out of love for the music and admiration for the performers. And the performers like to play here, not because it’s the prestigious place, but because the audience is so welcoming and appreciative.” Musicians also appreciate the concurrent art display: “We sometimes get away from a sense of interconnection of the arts,” says Novacek. Krantz adds, “It also highlights what Mary and her group have done: in an

area where there’s no obvious cultural center, she has created one.”

Says one listener, “It’s an opportunity to bring the whole family to hear a concert as good as you’d hear in downtown Philadelphia—and it’s affordable.”

The Sunday series is not all there is to the Bucks County Performing Arts Center. Outreach to children has been an integral part of its mission, and that outreach has become institutionalized in partnership with the Pennsbury School District. A dance residency, a theater program, and grants for teachers to bring in performers to the classrooms and assemblies are all examples of arts enrichment offered to school children under the partnership.

Here, as in the concert series, Ms. Borkovitz plays a decisive role in determining who gets to perform, and her standards are similarly rigorous. “What I don’t like”, she states, “is getting a glossy brochure advertising somebody, for example, doing opera for children. You go watch it and all they do is jump up and down, scream and yell. To me, that’s dumbing down the arts.” As a contrast she describes a school appearance by the Wister Quartet: “They were there for over an hour and those kids were mesmerized.” That day the children played their own

instruments on open strings with the quartet, and viewed a demonstration of a Stradivarius cello from a local collection of fine instruments. “They were able to hear the sound of a truly fine cello,” recounts Ms. Borkovitz. “The players made all kinds of analogies so the children could understand its age and value, and how magical it really was. I believe these experiences can be life-altering for kids. There’s a time in one’s life when something can just grab you and things are never the same afterward. And I’m sure that day there was someone who will look at music in a different way from now on.”

Developing those “someones” is not a wave of the hand. For this organization—or any community arts group—to continue to provide the resources, executive directors with complete headstrong dedication must persist; funding must continue; volunteers must be available. If all of this endures—and twenty-seven years is a good record—maybe those “someones” will be part of tomorrow’s audience not only at the Bucks County Performing Arts Center, but at classical music venues everywhere. 🎵

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