



Friends of Mozart

Newsletter

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The Friends of Mozart, 35 Years Young

By Mario R. Mercado

The Friends of Mozart, established in 1974, has during its 35-year-history contributed decisively to the cultural life of New York. It was formed by Erna Schwerin, with a small and dedicated group, on a challenge from Géza Rech, secretary general of the International Mozarteum Foundation in Salzburg, Austria. Rech wondered why a cosmopolitan, culturally sophisticated city like New York did not have an organization dedicated to Mozart. In Europe, societies devoted to artistic, literary, and musical figures were an established tradition, but such associations were mostly rare in the United States. Salzburg citizens had founded the International Mozarteum Foundation in 1880, with roots extending to 1841. (Today it is the leading center for Mozart research, maintaining the preeminent collection of Mozart manuscripts, correspondence, documents, and published literature on the composer, and presents concerts and festivals throughout the year.) Why not then an American Mozart organization in which individuals of shared interest could associate? And since music is the heart of Mozart (and vice versa), why not present concerts, especially of chamber music, in intimate settings, as might have been heard in Mozart's era? Indeed, why not? Such a society had long been a dream. Schwerin, a clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst by profession, and a Mozartean by passionate avocation, brought the keen scientific logic of her training to her decision, considering the relevance of such an organization and its programs in a city already saturated with musical events. After deliberation, she proceeded with verve and enthusiasm. In so doing, Schwerin established a model for other organizations. After a remarkable career devoted to the composer, his biography, music, and reception, and the group she established, Erna Schwerin stepped down as president in January 2009. The present writer has the privilege and the awesome responsibility of succeeding her. It is a coincidence and yet wholly fitting that Schwerin led the organization with distinction for 35 years, the length of Mozart's short life. Such a transition merits some reflection on Friends of Mozart, an overview of its history and its achievements as well as a consideration of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Before offering a modest summary of Friends of Mozart, its aims and programs, a word or two about the organization's context: New York

City, past and present. In May of this year, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts marked the 50th anniversary of the groundbreaking in 1959 of its 16-acre campus. It was, at the time, the first and largest performing arts center of its kind. For New Yorkers and visitors to the city, it may be difficult to believe 50 years have elapsed, but Lincoln Center, like any 50-year-old, needs some care and attention; underway is an ambitious \$1.2 billion campus-wide redevelopment which is to be completed in 2011. The buildings for Lincoln Center's constituent members, the New York City Ballet, Metropolitan Opera, Lincoln Center Theater, among others, were constructed throughout the 1960's. Philharmonic Hall (later renamed Avery Fisher Hall), inaugurated in 1962, was the first to be finished. It offered air-conditioning, which, surprising as it may sound today especially to younger readers of this newsletter, represented a technological innovation that afforded the opportunity of programming beyond the traditional September-to-May season. In short, there could be summertime concerts *indoors*.

Today's popular Mostly Mozart Festival at Lincoln Center originated under the title "Midsummer Serenades: A Mozart Festival" in August 1966. The organizers might be surprised that it would continue to this day. Even with air-conditioning was there an audience far away from the bucolic, summer homes of symphony orchestras and opera companies? And a festival devoted to Mozart, whose music was infrequently performed at the time, except for a handful of symphonies, piano concertos, and string quartets, seemed bold if not risky. But the programming of chamber and orchestral programs proved a success with critics and audiences from the beginning. The *New York Times* reported on August 2, 1966: "Twenty-six Mozart programs are being given in Philharmonic Hall this month. If the prospect seems a little stupefying on first consideration, last night's opening concert provided the simple, clear answer: You can't go wrong on Mozart. Provided, of course, you have a shrewdly arranged program, an ensemble of crack instrumentalists, a distinguished soloist and a sensitive conductor. All these were in evidence at the initial event, getting the series off to an excellent start." Mostly Mozart has evolved over the years, explored little-known repertoire, introduced musicians and ensembles, and produced many remarkable performances. In 2004, Mostly Mozart celebrated its 40th anniversary and today, under the leadership of music director Louis Langrée, has obtained a renewed vitality, marked by engaging programming, and ever-higher standards of performance.

Mostly Mozart proved a successful formula that has been repeated throughout the United States, from Oklahoma to California, and beyond. The rise of a veritable Mozart industry coincided with an evolving interest in the greater range of Mozart's music, from solo keyboard works to chamber music to opera (*Idomeneo* to *Clemenza di Tito* have become established in the repertoire of the Metropolitan Opera, along with the Da Ponte operas), so that more and more a fuller picture of Mozart and his oeuvre has emerged before the public. Significantly, in the autumn following the 1966 Midsummer Serenade, the Hungarian-born pianist Lili Kraus took on the complete Mozart piano concertos and performed them during the 1966-67 concert season at New York's Town Hall, a first in the annals of New York musical life. A review of the first concert in *Time* magazine conveys the audience response to this novelty: "Draped regally in a gold brocade gown, her hair piled high in a bun, Lili Kraus last week began the first lap of her Mozart marathon. In the opening Concerto No. 4, composed when Mozart was eleven, she unfolded the beguilingly simple melodies with a rippling grace and ease; in No. 9 she engaged the Mozart Chamber Orchestra in a lighthearted dialogue that rang with all the gusto of a back-porch gossipfest. And her reading of the passionate No. 20, the most popular of Mozart's piano

works, was clean refinement and intense drama. It was impeccable Mozart throughout, original without being eccentric, introspective without being pedantic. At concert's end, the sellout crowd in Manhattan's Town Hall applauded like baseball fans who had just shared in winning the first game of the World Series."

Throughout the 1960's and 1970's interest in Mozart's music was met by the marked growth of the record industry and ambitious recording projects involving complete genres: opera, symphonies, chamber music—most every corner of the Mozart repertoire. Scholarship received impetus in 1956, the bicentennial of Mozart's birth, with the launch of the *New Mozart Edition*, a critical, collected works edition published by the International Mozarteum Foundation in Salzburg that necessarily also advanced performance standards. The product of post-war and modern scholarship, the *New Mozart Edition* was completed in 2007—all 127 volumes. Moreover, Mozart has kept up with modern times. Today the edition is available online. The foundation's work continues. As recently as this summer, the foundation authenticated two early keyboard works—a fragment of a piano concerto and a prelude—as being composed by the child.

The Friends of Mozart was established during this burgeoning interest in the composer and his music. It has produced each season four to six concerts, on average, organized lecture demonstrations by leading performers and Mozart specialists, and published newsletters and monographs. As a result, Friends has carved a distinct spot on the New York cultural landscape and sustained itself for 35 years, while facing the challenges of a modest size non-profit organization. Its first concert, a program of Mozart piano trios, took place in the auditorium of the Marymount High School in New York. Its success brought the opportunity to present programs at what was then the Austrian Cultural Institute. The hall was attractive as was the use of a Bösendorfer grand piano, but the space was small, and the aim to present concerts to larger audiences, open to the public, brought a move to the auditorium of the City University of New York Graduate Center on West 42nd Street. In time, the rent increased and Friends went uptown to the concert hall at Columbia Artists Management Inc. on West 57th Street, where it presented its programs until a few years ago. New Yorkers recognize the truth in the expression "location, location, location," and anyone who has lived in New York for any length of time has likely been affected by the vagaries of real estate. Throughout its history, Friends of Mozart has obtained well-located venues, but it had to shift activities twice from the CAMI building, because of its planned and ultimate demolition, razed to make way for a high-rise office tower. The auditorium of the renovated Goethe Institut proved a handsome alternative, as have other spaces. This season, Friends presents four evening concerts, two in the fall, one each in winter and spring, at two locations: the Rose Studio at 70 Lincoln Center Plaza and the Christ and St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, three blocks from Lincoln Center. Both are distinguished by their acoustics and settings, ideal for chamber music.

Until recently, Friends of Mozart also presented two Saturday afternoon concerts at the Donnell Library Center, a branch of the New York Public Library, located in midtown, across from the Museum of Modern Art. In spite of the fact that the Donnell was one of the most heavily used libraries in the system, it was closed in 2008, a casualty of real estate development: plans called for a luxury hotel to be built in its place. The design was to accommodate a new library on the building's lower levels, but the financial and credit crisis intervened and the hotel

company pulled out of its agreement. At present, there is no library on West 53rd Street. The near capacity, enthusiastic audiences for those daytime concerts demonstrated a need that unfortunately goes unmet. Friends is searching for another suitable venue.

As mentioned above, through its publications, Friends of Mozart has contributed to Mozart scholarship on a wide range of subjects of specialized interest, but aimed at the general reader. Erna Schwerin has brought her psychoanalytic insight to bear on various topics, including penetrating studies of Mozart's wife and father, the dynamics of their relationships with the composer, in two monographs. The distinguished conductor Max Rudolf examined issues of orchestral performance practice in a significant newsletter essay. Robert W. Gutman, a member, produced the landmark *Mozart, A Cultural Biography*, published by Harcourt Brace in 1999. Mozart remains an enticing figure and his music a fertile subject. Friends of Mozart looks forward to bringing to its membership the work of a new generation of scholars and writers as well as recognized authorities.

As we begin the 2009-2010 season, Friends of Mozart will offer concerts by established artists, introduce musicians at the beginning of their careers, present the Claring Chamber Players, our ensemble-in-residence since 1983, and initiate collaborative programs with the young professionals being trained at conservatories and music schools. To address a wider and contemporary audience, Friends of Mozart is establishing a presence on the web through which it will disseminate information about the organization and its programs, weave together its membership, as well as reach to the community of Mozart lovers beyond New York.

In the conclusion of his biography of Mozart, the scholar Alfred Einstein assessed the composer's significance and his words remain apt:

...Mozart's influence transcends history. Each generation sees something different in his work...Mozart's music, which to so many of his contemporaries still seemed to have the brittleness of clay, has long since been transformed into gold, gleaning in the light, though it takes on a different luster for each new generation. Without it each generation would be infinitely poorer.

Mario R. Mercado is the author of *The Evolution of Mozart's Pianistic Style* and arts editor of *Travel + Leisure* magazine.

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