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For classical music, these are the golden ears



By David Patrick Stearns Inquirer Classical Music Critic

The search for young classical-music audiences reaches a gratifying conclusion when the young have grown old enough to have time for symphonies - and in places that have up-to-date technology.

The Philadelphia Orchestra may have been at home in the Kimmel Center one recent Sunday when young guest violinist Janine Jansen put her stamp on the Brahms Violin Concerto, but the performance was especially appreciated by a cultivated audience 25 miles away at the Hill at Whitmarsh, a retirement community in the scenic suburbs just outside Northwest Philadelphia.

"Range. Strength. Musicality," said resident Nancy Hess, who coordinates the Hill's music programs. Discussions on the fugue in Shostakovich's Symphony No. 11 followed.

The 100 or so Hill residents who heard the Sunday concert live in one of three dozen retirement communities that are pioneering Philadelphia Orchestra and Curtis Institute of Music simulcasts for a fraction of the money that New York's Metropolitan Opera lavishes on its movie-theater presentations. At the Hill - where simulcasts are seen in a lecture hall with a better-than-decent sound system - ticket sales, at \$10 per concert, cover the cost of the subscription. Other subscribers are said to make a small profit.

Why this music? This audience? The numbers are straightforward: 30,000 U.S. retirement communities with 50 million baby boomers closing in on them - a potentially huge market, said Mark Rupp, cofounder of SpectiCast, which produces the simulcasts.

"It's an older, more educated market," he said, one whose members don't necessarily want the pop music of their youth, instead preferring the classical music of their maturity.

Performing-arts organizations wring their hands over their failure to attract the under-40 crowd, and perhaps they always have. A memo in the Marlboro Music archives fretted about the Vermont festival's future amid a graying audience. It was dated 1958.

"As people age, they seek out an art form that's more intimate, personal, and enduring - and less subject to the winds of fashion," said Philip Maneval, director of the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, who discovered the Marlboro memo. "And when people embrace it . . . they tend to love classical music for the rest of their lives."

That bond is the backbone of one of Philadelphia's strongest and most sophisticated cultural communities. The 70-somethings are one of several contingents who create enough demand for a 65-event Philadelphia Chamber Music Society season.

It's a loyal bunch. Though the Philadelphia Orchestra's evening concerts may drop into the range of 60 percent attendance, the senior-heavy Friday-afternoon concerts often approach or surpass 90 percent. About 30 percent of Friday subscribers have maintained their commitment for 15 years or more. Besides attending concerts, this is a crowd that makes annual contributions.

"I miss James Levine," groused Muriel Petkun, a relatively recent transplant to the Hill from Boston, where Levine is music director, "but I pledge to the [Philadelphia Orchestra] fund. We want to see these organizations stay."

Most of those in the Hill's auditorium feel that way. Though fixed income often means people trying to live on salaries more viable 30 years ago, it can also refer to those who didn't lose their money in

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AKIRA SUWA / Staff Photographer

A Philadelphia Orchestra concert is simulcast at the Hill at Whitmarsh. Three dozen retirement communities take part in the program, which caters to an educated - and growing - market.

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The regulars at the Kimmel's Verizon Hall are hardly ostentatious - they dress and listen quietly - and the most conspicuous evidence of their presence are the shuttle buses that line Broad Street at the center during concerts.

They also are a cultivated audience: The "keyboard side" of Verizon Hall (from where pianists are best viewed) has a higher silver-haired population than other parts of the hall. Far from fitting the stereotype of marginalized retirees, some of the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society's most loyal listeners are community and industry leaders who still wield plenty of influence.

Commonly, the retirees had some casual musical indoctrination in previous decades - an elective music-appreciation class in college or trumpet lessons as a kid - that comes back to roost when their minds are no longer cluttered by their work lives. Retired surgeon [John Roberts](#) always went to some concerts, but they're a rather different experience now that his beeper doesn't come along, he said. He also has time to prepare for unusual items like the Shostakovich *Eleventh*. And Hill resident Phyllis Carter, who moved from [Florida](#) to be near family, took to music simply because it's here.

Some of the upscale retirement homes behave much like small-scale performing-arts centers. At Cathedral Village, the Quadrangle, the Fountains, Martin's Run, the Hill, and other places, concerts are played on the premises, sometimes with orchestra musicians but most often with young artists. Many less-than-ambulatory retirees were among the first to hear now-celebrated violinist [Hilary Hahn](#) play Bach, so active was she on the senior community circuit.

The more passionate among these young players - Hahn included - bristle at the suggestion that they're merely trying out repertoire for a captive, aging audience. These are real concerts, they say, and often more gratifying than more formal ones in concert halls. So uncontained was the enthusiasm for Hahn, at times, that she received a bouquet between Bach sonata movements rather than afterward. Other musicians walk away with gifts of needlepoint.

"Their energy was palpable today. Somebody shouted out, 'Oh, my god! Wow!' That happens in this setting - and doesn't in typical concerts," said Gwendolyn Krosnick, cellist of the Biava Quartet, one afternoon at Stapeley in Germantown, a community frequented by Astral Artists. The service agency for young artists has a strong bent toward populist music-making that includes 86 senior concerts this year - ones that are also a key part of its artists' development.

"These outreach concerts really humanize the musicians. When they're enclosed in a small space practicing for a particular recital, they don't get the opportunity to be in touch with the greater world," said Astral founder Vera Wilson. But with outreach opportunities, "by the time they come to [Carnegie Hall](#), it's much more informed performance or interpretation."

Also, musicians can learn certain kinds of communication imperatives only by digging into their psyches while projecting with extra intensity to an audience that might have various barriers to musical appreciation. In fact, the Biava Quartet has confronted the ultimate: deafness. Part of the therapy for those with hearing loss is to attend concerts holding balloons to feel vibrations from Beethoven.

No surprise that Biava members talk about breakthroughs in tough works that might not have happened without an audience of seniors. One was in the Brahms *String Quartet in C minor*, which often feels symphonic in scope but has content that shouldn't be writ large.

"We'd been struggling to get to the intimacy of it. It's subtle. It's not heart-on-the-sleeve, but we didn't want to be too pale, either," recalled violist Mary Persin. "But in playing for them, we found *something* that day."

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