

arts & entertainment

...on the Semiahmoo Peninsula

At 63 years and counting, White Rock Concerts has established a winning formula

Series balances traditional with the new

Alex Browne
Staff reporter

White Rock Concerts, the local subscription series founded 63 years ago by the virtuoso bassoonist – and Order of Canada recipient – George Zukerman, continues to defy all the odds.

While other series in this day and age struggle to maintain – even identify – an audience for classical music concerts, the home-grown article has a membership of close to 800 eager listeners. More than that, each year it has a list of people just waiting to buy a membership.

“We tell musicians and concert organizers from the West Coast to the East Coast about it, and they’re shocked,” said Marcel Bergmann, who with wife Elizabeth, has a busy cross-Canada and international performing schedule as the Bergmann Piano Duo (the pair have also served as artistic directors for the series for the past several seasons).

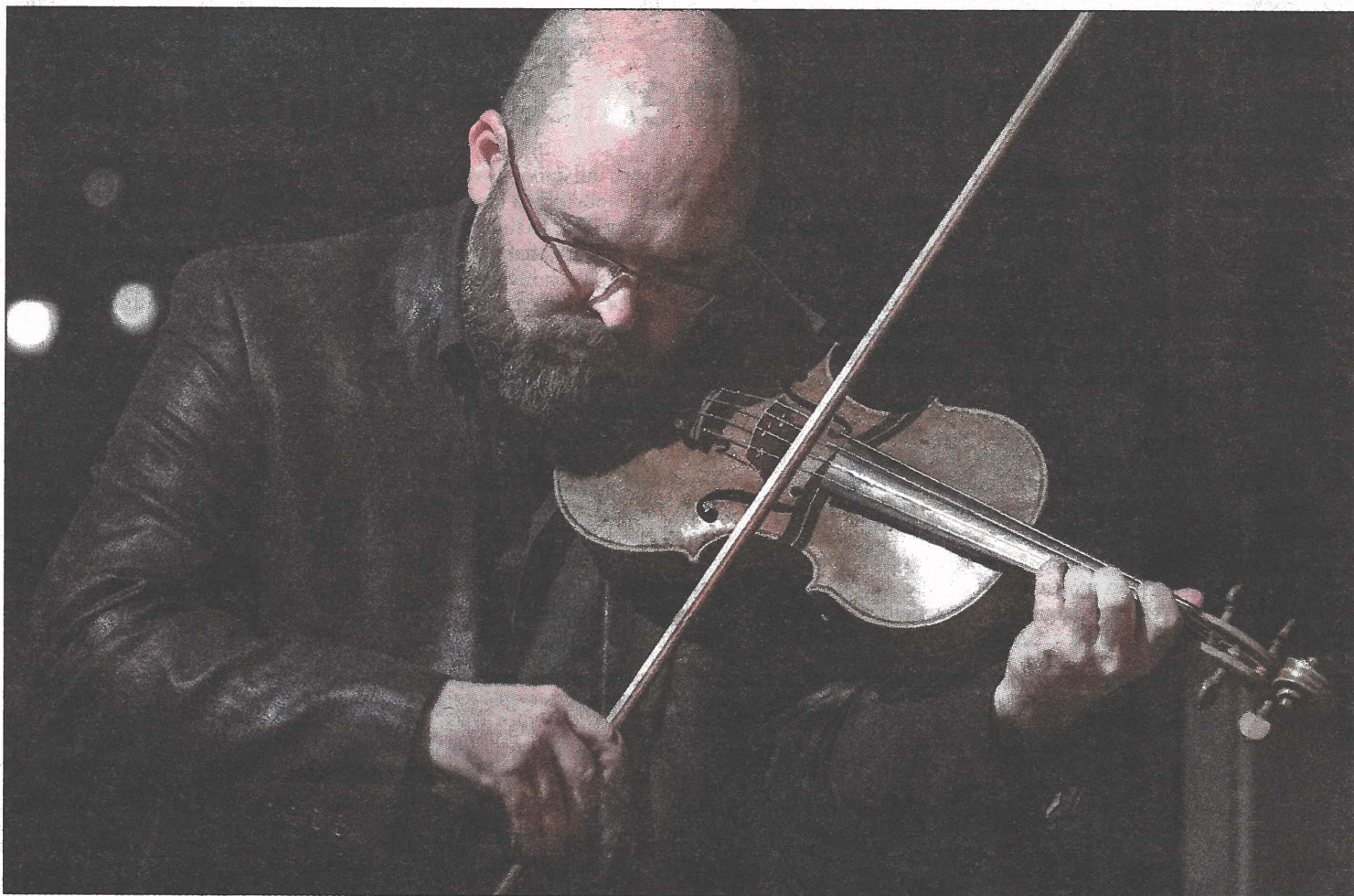
“People don’t understand how we can have this longevity, or the waiting list,” organization president John Leighton added.

The answer seems to be clear. Over the years, Zukerman – the now retired, but ever-interested and involved, artistic director emeritus – grew the series and carefully nurtured it with a canny combination of concerts with accessible novelty appeal, deeper dives into the catalogues of master composers and occasional well-timed forays into more challenging and *avant-garde* work that managed to expand the local audience’s musical understanding without abusing it.

Through his impeccable musical credentials and connections, Zukerman has established a proud Peninsula tradition of bringing world-class artistry to our own doorstep, minus the hassle of a long trek into Vancouver and the added trouble and expense of managing restaurant meals and parking.

And, as currently programmed imaginatively and respectfully by the Bergmanns, the series remains an outstanding cultural resource, with an annual membership price that is still an indisputable bargain for those – including students and younger listeners – open to exploring the classical repertoire.

Indeed, the only significant change in a winning formula is a new start time for concerts – 7:30 p.m. – starting with the season opener tonight (Friday, Sept. 27), a concert of masterworks by Bach and Haydn by



Contributed photos



internationally renowned cellist Colin Carr and the John Avison Chamber Orchestra at the regular venue, White Rock Baptist Church (1657 140 St.).

“We’re kind of late to the party as far as setting an earlier time,” Leighton said, noting that it has now become the norm for many Vancouver-area musical events, including the Vancouver Opera.

Violinist Mark Fewer (above) and the John Avison Chamber Orchestra will explore the music of Vivaldi in January, as part of the White Rock Concerts series, of which Elizabeth and Marcel Bergmann (left) are artistic directors.

“People just aren’t wanting to stay out as late as they used to,” he said. “And, fortunately, most of our members don’t have to travel very far, anyway.”

While it’s inevitable that some members might forget about the earlier start, Leighton said that past experience indicates many will likely get there even earlier than the new doors-open time of 7 p.m.

“It’ll mean less time to wait outside, although with some of our presentations people are there really early,” Elizabeth Bergmann said.

“Sometimes it’s almost like a rock concert – which makes us feel better, as classical musicians,” she laughed.

And even though the current season is now fully subscribed, people shouldn’t feel

discouraged about registering for the series waiting list, Leighton and the Bergmanns point out.

“Based on the turnover this year, there’s an excellent chance of becoming a member for next season,” Elizabeth said.

“I’d say that anybody joining the waiting list now is virtually guaranteed of getting in next year,” Leighton added.

Among the treats awaiting subscribers to this year’s season are a 30th anniversary concert by the Toronto-based St. Lawrence String Quartet, playing works by Mozart and Brahms plus a newly-commissioned piece by Osvaldo Golijoy (Nov. 1); an exploration of Vivaldi concertos with violinist Mark Fewer and the Avison Chamber Orchestra.

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Members 'open to edginess and newer things'

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(including Marcel as guest artist, Jan. 17); and, the *a cappella* vocal ensemble Musica Intima with Songs of Love (appropriately enough, on Feb. 14).

On Friday, March 13, rising Canadian pianist Charles Richard-Hamelin will make his White Rock debut with an evening of Beethoven and Chopin, while on April 17 the all-virtuoso Montrose Trio (pianist John Kimura Parker, violinist Martin Beaver and cellist Clive Greensmith) will also make its first appearance for the series with a concert devoted to Schubert and Dvorak.

Understandably one of the most exciting concerts of the season – for the Bergmanns personally – will come on Nov. 22, when they will team with

Vancouver's outstanding Turning Point Ensemble, well-known for exploring works, going back to the late 19th and early 20th century, that have pushed the envelope of classical repertoire.

"Marcel is making a new chamber version of his own *Concerto for Two Pianos*, with the orchestration squeezed down into an ensemble of 13 pieces," Elizabeth said.

This jazz-influenced piece will dovetail nicely with *Scenes from Childhood* by Vancouver jazz musician Brad Turner – which also gives the concert its title and theme.

"It's very exciting because we also have works by Ravel (*Ma mere L'Oye*, or Mother Goose Suite) and Debussy (his last orchestral piece *Jeux*, or

Games)," Marcel said.

"One of the things we have noticed in recent seasons is that more members seem open to edginess and newer things," Leighton said.

A case in point was this past February's audaciously non-traditional concert *The Music of the Spheres*, with the Vancouver Cantata Singers, which – Leighton and the Bergmanns noted – even amazed Zukerman with its power and ability to sway the White Rock audience.

"If a contemporary piece is performed with such conviction, and it's a quality performance, it will connect with people," Elizabeth said.

"We have to remember that, in its time, Beethoven's music was considered

avant-garde," Marcel said. "A lot of people have this idea that it was always accepted, which wasn't the case."

"It's a fine line we have to walk," Leighton said, adding that series organizers pay close attention to feedback from subscribers and are aware that some don't like too many musical challenges.

"It really helps when the artists introduce pieces and give some explanation of the context," said Marcel, with Elizabeth agreeing that it's something they encourage the performers to do.

"People are engaged when that happens," Leighton said.

For more information on the series, visit whiterockconcerts.com