

MUSIC-ON-THE-HILL

"The Survival of a Suburban Concert Series"

Music-On-The-Hill, a chamber music series in the West Bay Community, has maintained a record of quality concerts for a consistent and growing audience for sixteen years. For a community concert series, this longevity is to be recognized and commended. The concerts are held in the beautiful stone, Tudor style St. Luke's Episcopal Church, situated on a high hill overlooking the East Greenwich cove. The continued success and growing reputation for Music-On-The-Hill (MOTH) is due in part to the excellent standards for performers and programs that the Board of Directors has tried to maintain. Despite the rising cost of programs and artists, the series has managed to offer excellent concerts to the community for reasonable prices.

How did this interesting series begin and what factors have contributed to its success and longevity? The initial concept for the series was the natural outgrowth of an active music program under the direction of Priscilla A. Rigg at St. Luke's Church. While directing several choirs for the church, ages 4 to 74, she became increasingly concerned by the lack of cultural stimuli for the young choristers and their families within the area. Public schools at that time seemed more concerned with the physical capabilities of their students and seemed to neglect the cultural aspects of their education. School children rarely had the opportunity to hear a live concert performed by musicians with top quality skills. The Rhode Island Philharmonic visited the schools in East Greenwich only on alternate years, which obviously was not enough to stimulate interest in the arts and develop personal musical skills.

But East Greenwich was not always a cultural desert, for in earlier years the town enjoyed and supported several interesting organizations for the arts. During World War II, the Clef Community Chorus, with fifty singers, sang under the direction of a professional choral director, and the Clef Society, with membership of 125 music lovers and musicians, met monthly for programs. Both organizations regularly presented concerts in the town with many local residents participating, and every concert drew large, enthusiastic audiences. After the war, with the return of plentiful gasoline, people began to travel further a field for concerts and these two local organizations faded away.

In 1974, another energy crisis seriously curtailed traveling long distances to concerts and this helped to give support to the establishment of the new concert series, Music-On-The-Hill in East Greenwich, at St. Luke's Church. The founding committee of the series consisted of two businessmen, three musicians, and all members of the parish. The goals projected by the committee for the series were: to provide concerts, at minimal cost, within the community; to expand musical horizons with a variety of Chamber programs; to maintain a high artistic level for the concerts; to provide the opportunity for professional musicians to maintain musical skills through performance. These original goals are still important criteria in considering performers and programs.

Historically, the church has provided a large umbrella for arts in the towns and cities. It offers good

facilities for concerts, and usually has a potential for building an audience from the parish membership. In the early years of MOTH, the parish of St. Luke's gave vital support to the new series. Gradually, as MOTH has gained stability and a growing list of subscribers, the small founding committee was replaced by a larger organization with people from the community.

In the spring of 1981, Music-On-The-Hill became incorporated, with elected officers and a board of directors. After guiding the series since 1974, Priscilla Rigg became the first President, followed by Hr. Ernest Drew, Dr. Bruce L. Stevens, Hr. Howard Silverman and the current President, Mr. Arnold Hellewell.

The first concert presented by MOTH, on Sunday, November 8, 1974, featured "The Master Singers of Boston", directed by Allen Lannon. The remaining programs for the season were given by the Fara Chamber Players, the Providence Recorder Society and the Barrington College Symphonic Band.

The program during these early years included the Boston Archdiocesan Boys Choir, the Rhode Island Philharmonic Brass, the Berklee Jazz Band, the Hartt School of Music touring opera, the Greenwood Consort and a Pops Concert by the Warwick Symphony Orchestra.

In recent years, MOTH has brought important groups from greater distances, such as the famous Boston Camerata, Joel Cohen, Director, the Greylock Trio, the Live Oak Trio, the Delos String Quartet, the Yale Glee Club and many other performers of equally high caliber.

As an outreach program, Priscilla Rigg designed a schedule of concerts for the local public schools. Many performers for Music-On-The-Hill offered reduced rates for special one day workshops in the schools in connection with their appearance for the MOTH Series. Ms. Rigg presented the plan to the local Rotarians who approved the funding for such a program for the first year. From this attempt to raise the level of music presentations in the public schools, a new organization was formed by the parents of students called COA, Cultural Organization of the Arts. In subsequent years, COA decided to follow a different program for the arts and discontinued the coordinated effort with Music-On-The-Hill.

The character of small community concerts is quite different from the larger cosmopolitan programs. Subscribers, who have been attending the MOTH series for several years, enjoy the fellowship at intermission over coffee, punch and cookies. Occasionally, the season opens with a catered dinner or offers some other social event to encourage the subscribers to get acquainted. The Sunday afternoon 4:00 p.m. concerts have been very popular with Senior Citizens who enjoy the close proximity of the programs.

In addition to subscription and door sales, MOTH receives some funding from the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts and the New England Foundation for the Arts, under the New England Touring Program. Recently, MOTH joined Chamber Music United, which is a consortium of Chamber Music presenters and performers. The intent of this Chamber Music United, chaired by Aaron Roitman, is to strengthen interest in Chamber Music throughout the state.

Keeping a concert series alive and well today is a challenging job. But through the persistence and dedication of the Board of Directors and Officers of Music-On-The-Hill, the series has managed to survive despite the many other community attractions. Hopefully, MOTH will continue to enhance the cultural life of the West Bay Community for several years to come. Support from the Community is vital to the longevity of this outstanding music series.