

Arts in Mind

Mill Valley Philharmonic Brings Music to the People

By Suz Lipman

An orchestral concert that features birdsong? How about one that conjures the driving rhythms of machines? You might call it multi-media, cross-discipline, or just plain fun. Laurie Cohen, Music Director of the Mill Valley Philharmonic, sees it as an important aspect of her orchestra's mission, which includes offering free concerts to people of all ages and means in their own communities, and providing innovative programming by local composers and players as a way to connect audience members with the music and the musicians.

Cohen founded the Mill Valley Philharmonic eight years ago, changing its name from the Tennessee Valley Orchestra in 2003, and growing the orchestra from 15 to 50 dedicated amateur musicians. A strong proponent of accessible music for all ages, she actively encourages young and old alike to attend concerts. The group's 7th annual Family Concert/Ice Cream Social – always a standing-room event – will take place June 1.

“One thing I find fantastic is that we've presented a number of world premieres, some outside the realm of what children listen to, not to mention adults,” Cohen said. “The kids always love what we do.”

Another feature of the Philharmonic is that all of the original music the group commissions and performs is the work of local composers, even though solicitations come in from all over the world. “Audience members can identify with local composers and soloists,” Cohen said. “It's one more opportunity to make contact with the community.”

In 2006, Tara Flandreau, Chair of the Performing Arts Department at College of Marin, composed an original piece, “Timepiece”, which Cohen had commissioned for the program, “Man and his Machines”. Another local composer, cellist Moses Sedler, will debut his original piece in the Philharmonic's May/June concert this year. The theme of that upcoming concert will be “Take a River Trip with the Mill Valley Philharmonic”.

For that concert, Cohen engaged Mill Valley Streamkeepers to educate the audience about the importance of waterways, something else that goes to the heart of Cohen and the Philharmonic's mission.

“Audience education is integral to what we've done at every performance since 2003,” Cohen said. She enjoys collaborating with unexpected partners, one of which was the Marin Audubon Society, which docented the 2004 program, “Birdsong in 20th Century Music”.

Clearly, the programming of concerts is a joy to Cohen. “I love doing it,” she said. “I might not necessarily get a thematic idea. I might research various composers’ sounds, exploring what sounds go well together and would work in a concert.”

The group’s upcoming program in March is sound-derived. “It was inspired by my wanting to do Beethoven’s 7th Symphony. Though difficult and fast, it’s a marvelous dance,” Cohen said, adding that Beethoven’s 7th is a piece many musicians wish to perform. “Challenging repertoire is one of the things that draws musicians into a community orchestra.”

Researching contemporaries of Beethoven, to round out the program, Cohen alighted on C.M. Von Weber, who, she noted, thought the 7th Symphony was so driving in its energy that Beethoven must have been insane. Also in the program is a symphony by Luigi Cherubini, whom Beethoven felt was one of the best among his contemporary composers.

Interestingly, Cohen didn’t start conducting until she was in her early 50s. A cellist and psychotherapist, she also taught music at Tam High. When her son was a senior at Tam, she began to study conducting with Urs Leonhardt Steiner, founder of San Francisco Community Music Center Orchestra. Admittedly terrified to begin conducting, she nonetheless became Steiner’s Assistant Conductor within a year. It was then that she saw a niche in Marin County for an independent community orchestra.

“Amateur music is an important human experience,” Cohen said, adding that the Philharmonic is comprised of housekeepers, doctors, lawyers, homemakers -- a whole range of dedicated, talented amateurs. “There’s a huge amount of heart in the performances, and people respond to the level of playing,” she said. “This provides a huge joy to me and makes me feel like I’m contributing to my community by bringing people live, free orchestral music. The larger community participates by listening and volunteering.” The Philharmonic also performs outreach concerts in senior residences, community centers, and other public venues.

“Art is the soul of the people,” Cohen said. “Everyone should have access to it.” She continued, “Art touches something extremely deep in people. I believe that is particularly true of music, which is the most highly abstract of the arts. It is sound that expresses emotion. It’s extremely powerful.” That emotional response can be had with a CD, of course, but for Cohen, “There is nothing like live music.”

In keeping with that spirit, the Philharmonic performed a 2007 program of music written during the 1930s, which they performed in sites that featured murals created during the period, through the Works Progress Administration. “The WPA offered free or nickel concerts, and people would line up.” Cohen noted. “They were starving, and starving for the arts.” As this year marks the 75th anniversary of the signing of New Deal, the government program that included the WPA, Cohen may reprise the WPA concert and take it on tour to mural sites.

Cohen added, “When I first started studying with Urs Steiner, I walked into a rehearsal and it felt like I was walking through to a magic world of sound. I thought, What a privilege it would be to be in that world. I still feel that way every time I’m up on the podium.”

The Mill Valley Philharmonic will be performing the program, “Beethoven and His Contemporaries”, on the following dates: Fri., March 14, 8:00pm, Mt. Tamalpais United Methodist Church, 410 Sycamore Avenue, Mill Valley, Sat., March 15, 4:00pm, Mt. Tamalpais United Methodist Church, 410 Sycamore Avenue, Mill Valley, Sun., March 16, 3:00pm, Corte Madera Recreation Center, 498 Tamalpais Dr., Corte Madera

The program will include C.M. Von Weber’s “Turandot Overture”, Luigi Cherubini’s “Symphony in D Major” (Larghetto and Menuetto), Felix Mendelssohn’s “Nocturne” from “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”, and Ludwig von Beethoven’s “Symphony No. 7”.

The “Take a River Trip with the Mill Valley Philharmonic” program will be presented May 30, June 1 and June 6. The Ice Cream Social, presented with the Tam Valley Community Services District, will take place at the June 1 concert. The program will include works by Smetana, Butterworth, Debussy, and local composer Moses Sedler.

Concerts are free; \$10 ticket donation requested.

The Philharmonic will also play during Mill Valley’s Memorial Day festivities. For more information about upcoming concerts, please visit [www. millvalleyphilharmonic.org](http://www.millvalleyphilharmonic.org) or call 383-0930.

“Arts in Mind” is a series from Kiddo! that explores arts and arts education. Suz Lipman is a writer and parent in the Mill Valley School District.