

President's Review  
2024-2025 Friends of Music  
Annual Meeting: July 1, 2025

**2024 – 2025 Friends of Music Concert Series**

September 14, 2024 *Early & Celtic Music*, with guest ensemble Gut, Wind and Wire

Nov 2 & 3, 2024 *Radiance and Fire*, Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra with guest artist Amit Peled, *cello*

January 26, 2025 *Iconic Film Scores and Soundtracks from Hollywood*, Two Rivers String Quartet

March 29 & 30, 2025 *Working with No-Nets*, Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra featuring 9 principal musicians

May 31 & June 1, 2025 *En Famille*, Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra with guest artists Stefan Jackiw, *violin*, and Yoonah Kim, *clarinet*

Our 25<sup>th</sup> Season started with a concert of early music by three guest artists (Gut, Wind and Wire) performing on period instruments. Then two of our traditional Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra concerts featured special guests: Amit Peled on cello in November and both Stefan Jackiw on violin and Yoonah Kim on clarinet in May/June. In between, we got to enjoy the talents of multiple principal musicians, first when our Two Rivers String Quartet played Hollywood movie themes and then when a Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra featured 9 of them playing nonets. The season's programming was varied and vibrant, geared to frequent requests to extend the range of selections and insert newer works among more recognizable selections. Comments after concerts – some in person, many in surveys – indicate that to a very large degree the audience much appreciates our efforts.

Friends of Music has a five-year strategic plan that is periodically updated. Last year's review went into significant detail on the guiding principles we follow, noting both progress and challenges. This year, I want to look back at an important change underway. In the strategic plan, we stress that the quality of music offered and the satisfaction of our audience are the highest priorities. This, we believe, is key to maintaining and increasing our audience over time. And it is why we keep asking attendees what they like (or dislike), often probing for specifics. We recognize that tastes change, so in trying to stay on top of audience preferences, we take most seriously the recurrent requests to offer variety and to be "stretched" at times.

Programming is planned at least a year in advance, and during recent seasons we tried varying concert formats in terms of orchestra size and venues – both to gauge audience preferences and to consider how best to deploy our financial resources. If faced with limited funding, we have the option of scheduling smaller ensembles and/or fewer guest artists. But the relevant repertoire for small groups is limited, and we recognize that bigger chamber orchestra concerts are the most popular. We also don't want to overspend, feeling it is essential to keep ticket prices stable.

With these concerns in mind, the board considered whether it would be useful to up our game financially and programmatically. By investing more up front and hosting more chamber orchestra concerts each season, we felt that attendance and ticket sales would increase over time. In fact, attendance and ticket sales did increase this year. Revenue from memberships and ticket sales totaled over \$27,000. Interestingly, season memberships decreased, yet individual ticket sales increased. We surmise that many people these days prefer to make their plans on short notice. Thankfully, we also have a generous donor base and supportive foundation and corporate sponsors, critical support from the state, and loyal advertisers.

During the 2024-2025 season we received over \$46,000 (33% of budget) in individual contributions spurred by a very successful matching gift challenge celebrating our 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. Six foundation grants were received totaling \$33,650 with one grant still pending. Funding received from the state Department of Arts, Culture and History is critical, and we are blessed to have additional foundations supporting our work including the Ecolab Foundation, the Nora Roberts Foundation and the Marion Parker Lewis Foundation, Corporate sponsors remained at four and program advertisers dropped from 40 to 36 this year, however, revenue increased due to an increase in larger and color ads. Corporate and advertising revenue accounted for 9.3% of budget.

The increase in contributions due to the successful matching gift challenges in 2024 and 2023 allowed us to embark on an expansion journey. At present, we are steadily strengthening programming, while also increasing our reserves. To demonstrate our gratitude to donors and to the entire community for the gifts bestowed on us, Friends of Music joined in hosting a free concert on June 22, 2025. Commemorating the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bee Line March, something very meaningful in our environs, tunes from the Revolutionary era were played on period instruments. The program demonstrated the way beat and sound are integral to our history.

Looking at the programs and artists we have contracted for next season, I am thrilled at the expanded opportunities Friends of Music is creating for our local and regional musicians to shine and share their talents. The 2025-26 offerings promise much superb music that is sure to please novices and aficionados alike.

None of this would be possible without our wonderful Music Director Jed Gaylin; he is critical to our success. Capitalizing on Jed's considerable organizational skills, and his talents as a musician and conductor, we have attracted a cadre of very talented professionals. After playing together for multiple years, they have formed strong working relationships and the camaraderie among them – and with Jed – is wonderful to watch. We have also been incorporating our core musicians more frequently into programs as soloists. It has been gratifying to see how much the audience takes pride in these individuals.

We continue to offer pre-concert talks when scheduling permits. Jed's knowledge and excitement at these discussions is infectious and the talks complement the material presented in our concert program notes. We also rely upon and benefit from Jed's reputation in the performing and conducting world. His friendships and working relationships with top-flight artists have brought us incredibly talented individuals who might not otherwise grace our somewhat compact market. Amit Peled, Stefan Jackiw, and Yoonah Kim who joined us this season are internationally renowned artists. Each gave stellar performances that were greatly appreciated by the audience. And our regular musicians enjoyed them, too; working with such talented individuals brings out the best in everyone and many of our musicians have commented on how it helps in their own teaching and performing careers. What has been especially gratifying is the feedback these guest artists offered about our audience, noting how knowledgeable and engaged we are – among the best audiences they have encountered. No wonder that Friends of Music is seen as a sparkling gem.

Bringing wonderful music and great enjoyment to our locale is not all that Friends of Music does. In recent years, we have developed a strong education component that our board hopes will increase appreciation for classical music and encourage audience growth well into the future. The original impetus was the realization that local public schools simply don't have the resources needed to expose young people to music and allow them to develop the learning and performance skills that can strengthen their life prospects. By giving mini grants to music teachers, we have encouraged teachers to enhance their curricula and increase the stock of instruments available to students. At this point, we are now impacting upwards of 20 schools annually and finding most of our materials actually serve students over multiple years.

This year we awarded 21 grants totaling \$6,115 to 20 public schools in Jefferson and Berkeley Counties. To augment foundation support, Friends of Music allotted additional funds from its operating income and Board members also personally made donations to ensure ongoing viability of the educational initiatives. In addition, we offered four \$500 scholarships to graduating seniors who want to keep music an integral part of their college experience. Finally, our Scott Beard Internship has become a very significant prong within our education outreach domain. A Shepherd University music student works side-by-side with our administrator and learns virtually the full range of tasks needed to keep a non-

profit organization functioning and solvent. In return, we get the benefit of skill sets and perspectives that strengthen multiple facets of our operations. The interns have enhanced our efforts in the social media arena by beefing up our presence on FB and Instagram in particular. Spending nearly 10% of our budget on educational outreach, as a Board we feel this segment of activity is critical to building our listening audience and strengthening the performing arts overall.

Looking back at this season – and the last several years at the helm of this organization, what I find most gratifying is how our community has embraced the totality of our efforts. I think that many attendees and supporters share our board’s belief that Friends of Music is and should be more than an outlet that simply serves a select audience of music lovers. We see it both as a goal and a responsibility to enhance the community more broadly.

The evolution of this organization has been significant. Starting with a single concert annually, the organization now hosts a 5-concert season with evening and matinee performances, and underwrites the Two Rivers Chamber Orchestra as well as multiple education-related activities. Such progress would not be possible without a strong and very active board, enhanced this year with three new members. I have now served as VP or President for nearly a decade and believe this group of people deserves both thanks and accolades. It is thoughtful, at times prescient, and cohesive, with everyone putting their shoulder to the wheel in specific but complementary ways. It has been a real honor and delight to be part of an organization now celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> year.

Still, it is time to pass the baton to a new leader and enjoy the fruits of our labors, with both ongoing and new folks added to the board. One is Sherry Sykes, who very ably served as Administrator for the past 3 and a half years. She and I have had a wonderful time working together. Heidi Johnston has been our VP and is a great colleague. She brings a stellar skill set to the organization and we have enjoyed working together for at least a year to ensure a smooth transition. I feel confident Heidi will take us to new levels of productivity. I encourage readers of this annual review to peruse the bios of all our board members. Each is special and they are a terrific team. For me, “Immediate Past President” has a nice ring to it. I look forward to finding opportunities in this new role to assist Friends of Music as it moves forward.

With best wishes to all.

*Judith Miller Jones*