

GREAT AUDIENCES

FOR THERE TO BE GREAT MUSIC IT HELPS TO HAVE GREAT AUDIENCES. HERE IS THE FIRST IN A SERIES ON FANS OF THE ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY

BY JEANNETTE COOPERMAN



The Godwins in their Central West End home

A child of the '60s, Gary Godwin listened to Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, Quicksilver Messenger Service. But he also listened to stuff his parents played, like Tchaikovsky. And when he and his friends at Country Day School started a little business selling vinyl, he pored over the Deutsche Grammophon catalog and ordered as much Sibelius and Mahler as he could.

He also listened to old blues music with his friends, one of whom had a cute little sister Gary barely noticed. He went off to college, worked for galleries on both coasts, came home to attend law school—and bumped into the little sister.

Deb Hohlt was as magnetized by art and music as he was. She'd grown up going to the symphony with her father every Friday night—it was their time together, and her mother's night off. Now Gary was the one taking her

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to concerts. And by the time Music Director David Robertson arrived, the Godwins were long married and attending the Symphony so religiously, they subscribed to season tickets.

“We weren’t getting concerts on the calendar, and we felt like we were missing great performances,” Deb explains. “And we have a loft in the Central West End, so we have no excuse not to go. It’s raining? So what. And Robertson....”

“David Robertson has been just electric for us,” Gary inserts. “He’s got such encyclopedic knowledge and such great stage presence and such interest in educating the audience. And he’s really fun.” The Godwins also began going to many of the Symphony’s free community concerts,

because the chamber music in those intimate, unexpected locations was so amazing. Both Godwins are deeply interested in contemporary art. Deb is the Director of Development at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, but her previous job was at the former Forum for Contemporary Art, now the Contemporary Art Museum, and Gary’s an art dealer, specializing in prints and drawings from the ’60s on. They love the cool challenge of the concerts at the Pulitzer. “That’s where David can really cut loose,” Gary observes.

But the concert that turned them into donors was held on a snowy Sunday in the relic-lined chapel of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, just off South Broadway. “Two young men played—violinists, I think from Beirut,” recalls Deb. She watched the blur of strings as their bowing caught a frenzied, passionate rhythm of the old folk songs; the gentle lyrical glides of



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the classical pieces. Every once in a while, she broke away to look around at the packed chapel, the rapt faces of people of every age, color, creed, and thought, “It just doesn’t get better than this.”

Gary now serves on the board of the Silk Foundation, which supports the community concerts. “They were doing such a terrific job of reaching out to different audiences,” he says, “playing at temples, schools, the Site-man Cancer Center... And you see the caliber of the performers, and we started to meet some of them...”

The Godwins go to those concerts and the Powell Hall concerts, as many as possible. “Definitely Opening Weekend,” Deb says. “Definitely Closing Weekend, definitely any time it’s Sibelius or Mahler” (for Gary)

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“or Stravinsky” (for her). “There was this great concert a few years ago, when the Symphony did *The Rite of Spring*, and that actually prompted us to go to Quebec City, because there was this really great exhibition of costumes from the Ballets Russes, and a music performance there of Stravinsky.” This summer, after hearing Jean-Yves Thibaudet play the piano with the St. Louis Symphony, they drove up to Chicago to hear him play there. Then they flew to the Marlboro Music Festival in Vermont’s Green Mountains. The previous summer they’d gone to the Grieg Festival in Norway.

Music opens the world, but it’s also their homecoming, and nothing replaces concerts in the crimson and gold of Powell Hall. They’ll meet friends for a quiet dinner at Anthony’s Bar: “They’ll get us in and out,” explains Deb, “and our ideal experience is to get to Powell early enough to catch David’s pre-concert lecture, then sit in the Met bar and have a glass of champagne before the concert starts.”

The Godwins were thrilled by the introduction of the visual in concerts last season, with video projections by S. Katy Tucker for three programs, including the season closer, *Aida*. They also love Robertson’s engaging way of mixing it up, offering a popular and accessible repertoire while also “introducing what’s new and making it relevant,” Gary says. “He persists.”

And so do they, showing up faithfully and letting what they hear inspire them to travel further, both physically and emotionally. Could they ever survive without music?

Long pause.

“I can’t go a *day* without music,” Deb blurts. “And I can’t go a day without exploring something.” If she didn’t have a world-class symphony practically next door, she says, “I think we’d have to move. Either we’d have to start one, or we’d have to move.”

She brightens. “But I don’t think the Symphony’s going *anywhere*.”

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