CHAMBER ARTS SOCIETY 1945–1995

FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY
Music speaks not only to our thoughts but to our hearts and spirits, to the very core and root of our souls. Its joys and sorrows enlarge our comprehension. It is the universal voice of humanity.
HISTORY
OF THE
CHAMBERT
ARTS SOCIETY

Leland R. Phelps
In the summer of 1945, six people met for an evening of informal discussion concerning the possibility of forming an association which, through lectures, exhibits, and concerts, would offer members of the Durham and Duke University communities an opportunity to further their enjoyment, understanding, and appreciation of the fine arts. The moving force behind this gathering was Ernest Nelson, Professor of Renaissance History at Duke. He was also an accomplished pianist and an ardent performer and devotee of chamber music. The other members of this group were Professor Katherine Gilbert, Chair of the Department of Aesthetics, Art and Music; Allan Bone, Professor of Music and Clarinet; Mrs. Elizabeth Ropp, and Mrs. Frank Fuller. By the end of the evening there was a consensus for the formation of an arts society. Shortly thereafter a committee was formed consisting of the above-mentioned plus Professor Robert Hull, conductor of the Duke University Symphony, Mrs. W. C. Davison, and Mrs. Newman White. Professor Nelson was elected chairman and Mrs. Ropp became secretary-treasurer.

The committee set to work at once to find a suitable program with which to launch the series in the fall of 1945. It was not difficult for the committee of a society interested in sponsoring lectures, exhibits and concerts to find an excellent inaugural program for the year. Clare Leighton, the distinguished English printmaker, was at the time artist-in-residence at Duke University and was to have a show of her works that fall in the Woman's College Library. She was invited to present a lecture as the first event sponsored by the newly-formed Chamber Arts Society. Miss Leighton not only graciously accepted the invitation but offered to create a special wood-engraving and make 125 signed original prints which the Society could then use as a special inducement to attract founding members.

Once arrangements for the first program had been made, the committee allowed Professor Nelson to plan the remaining offerings for the 1945-1946 season, a function he continued to fulfill throughout the next three decades. On October 17 he sent out the following notice soliciting members for the newly-formed cultural undertaking:

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1 I am indebted to Mrs. Ropp, the first secretary of the Chamber Arts Society, for the assistance she has given me with the formative stage of the Society. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Dorothy and Edgar Alden and Edith London for assistance with this project.
Legends on the back: A House Near Durham, an original wood engraving by Claire Leighton, is published in an edition of one hundred twenty-five copies, exclusively for members of the Chamber Arts Society of Durham, North Carolina.
The Chamber Arts Society invites you to membership and to participation in its activities. The first meeting will take place in the North Gallery of the Woman's College Library on Wednesday evening, October 24th, at 8 p.m.

This meeting will be of special interest because of the fortunate circumstance that Miss Clare Leighton will address the members on Quality in Prints. In the gallery, examples of the artist's recent wood engravings in all stages of evolution from the initial pencil sketch to the completed work will be displayed. Miss Leighton is at present working on a wood engraving which will serve to mark the inauguration of our Society, an original print from this engraving will be distributed to the members.

It is expected that we shall soon be able to announce to members concerts of Chamber Music by one or two of the finest string quartets. In addition, at various times throughout the year, members will be invited to hear concerts of Chamber Music in various combinations of strings, wood winds, voices (madrigals), etc., by groups made up from our own membership and musicians from nearby towns.

The cost and conditions of membership in the Society are as follows:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Membership Type</th>
<th>Fee</th>
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<tr>
<td>Adult membership</td>
<td>$5.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adult membership for second member of family</td>
<td>$2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children under sixteen</td>
<td>Admitted free with parent member.</td>
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As of October 17 no other events had been definitely scheduled. Professor Nelson was, however, corresponding with concert agents in New York and hoped to book attractions for the new society, which he estimated would have "one hundred members at least." Eighty enthusiastic subscribers attended Clare Leighton's lecture, which was to be the only non-musical program ever sponsored by the Society.

To understand the role which fate played in the second program, it is interesting to know that one of Ernest Nelson's very best friends was Professor Hans Neurath of the Department of Biochemistry. Like Professor Nelson, he was also a capable pianist and a chamber music enthusiast. The two often spent evenings together talking about and making music, and particularly enjoyed playing piano duets from Professor Nelson's large music library.

On November 26, 1945, the Duke Artists Series had scheduled a concert in Page Auditorium by the Pittsburgh Symphony. Professor Neurath's brother was a violinist in that orchestra. At Ernest's behest, Professor Neurath asked his brother to form a quartet and play a concert for the Chamber Arts Society on November 25th, the evening before the Symphony's Durham concert. As the orchestra was to be in Columbia, South Carolina, before coming to Durham,
Professor Nelson volunteered to drive there and pick up the quartet. The musicians would then be in Durham when their colleagues arrived for the November 26th concert. For their only appearance as a string quartet the four musicians assumed the name “Carnegie Quartet” and for the grand sum of $100 offered the following program in which they were joined by Allan Bone, clarinetist and Professor of Music at Duke:

Haydn, *Quartet in D Minor, Op.76 No.2*
Mozart, *Clarinet Quintet in A Major, K581*
Beethoven, *Quartet in F Major, Op.18 No.1*

This was “the first musical event of the series,” as Professor Nelson referred to it, and since that date the flow of chamber music has continued uninterrupted for half a century.

Professor Nelson had more time to arrange for the third program and was able to engage the Gordon String Quartet for December 5th. In the notice which he sent out to announce this concert to members and potential subscribers he wrote: “This will be the very first musical gathering of our new ‘Society’ and a great deal of importance is attached to it from our point of view.” Actually, satisfying as the concert by the musicians from the Pittsburgh Orchestra had been, the Carnegie Quartet was not an established and experienced professional ensemble. The Gordon Quartet was particularly important for Professor Nelson because it had launched the very successful New Friends of

*Ernest W. Nelson*

Music concert series at Town Hall in New York City; he saw a significant parallel in their approaching concert for the Chamber Arts Society in Durham. The appearance of this prominent professional quartet marked the real beginning of what he had envisioned as a chamber music series of the highest order. This concert truly was for him “the very first musical gathering of our new Society,” which would offer “concerts of chamber music by one or two of the finest string quartets.” From the very beginning, Ernest’s top priority was quality, regardless of price.
The second “fine string quartet” selected to play during the first year was the Pro Arte Quartet. Professor Nelson had contracted for two concerts which were to be given on February 2 and 3, 1946, and the quartet had also promised to play a third concert at no additional expense. The following invitation was included in the announcement of the Pro Arte concerts:

**IMPROMPTU PROGRAM**

Finally, may we invite all members to an impromptu program by members of the Society (admittance by Membership Card) to be given this Saturday evening, January 19th at 8:30 p.m. in the Music Room of East Duke Building. While the program is not as yet completely worked out, it is expected to include a Mozart Trio (clarinet, viola, piano) played by Earl Mueller, Julia Mueller, and Hans Neurath, a program of songs by Brantley Watson and by Mildred Weatherspoon, and a piano selection by Ernest W. Nelson.

In January, word was received that the southern tour of the Pro Arte Quartet had been cancelled. Needless to say, Professor Nelson was very disappointed. Unable to get a chamber music ensemble to replace the Pro Arte, he scheduled a program by pianist Fritz Jahoda for March 2nd. The sixth and seventh programs for the Society’s first year were two concerts by the famous Albeneri Trio, on March 25 and 26. Professor Nelson was determined to spare no expense to make this a memorable experience for his subscribers and had his own Steinway moved to the East Duke Music Room for the two performances by Alexander Schneider, Benar Heifetz and Erich Itor Kahn.

The eighth and final program for the first year was given on May 5, 1945. Professor Edward Lovinsky, musicologist and pianist at Black Mountain College in western North Carolina, had been invited to give a lecture for the Erasmus Club at Duke on May 6, 1945. Dr. Lovinsky and his wife, who played violin, were musicians with excellent reputations and Professor Nelson prevailed upon them to arrive a day early and close out the first season of the Chamber Arts Society with a program of violin sonatas.

The first year had been a full one and the pace had been hectic for the chairman. The eight programs that had been sponsored were more than would ever be offered again during one season. It had not been possible to schedule programs for the year as a whole in advance because the Society did not become active until the month of October, 1945. Nevertheless, attendance had increased from 80 at the first event to 100 by December and to over 200 by the end of the first season.
Despite the dramatic growth in numbers of attendees, Professor Nelson was confronted at the end of the season with a shortfall of $750. Willing to do everything possible to keep the series alive, he quietly made up the entire deficit himself. At this point he knew that if the project were to succeed, he needed help. Fortunately, the right people were close at hand in Chapel Hill. In 1941, Edgar and Dorothy Alden had been founding members of the Raleigh Chamber Music Guild. In 1946, when Edgar returned home from military service during World War II, he and his wife did not go back to Raleigh but settled in Chapel Hill, where he joined the faculty of the University of North Carolina Department of Music. With guidance from the Aldens, Ernest developed a much more professional attitude toward the business side of the venture and a more focused approach to programming. He reduced the number of programs which resulted in reduced involvement by local artists.

In the summer of 1946 Professor Nelson engaged the Pasquier Trio for a concert the following January. This engagement resulted in the first of many personal friendships which he formed with musicians over the years. As a result, ensembles like the Pasquier Trio returned to Durham many times not just to play a concert but to savor the friendship and hospitality offered them here. Committee members have fond memories of informal post-concert dinners with the musicians in Ernest’s apartment, where he used his Steinway grand as a buffet. Such receptions are always much appreciated by the artists and guests alike.

The Cambridge Collegium Musicum (violin, cello and harpsichord) was engaged as the second touring ensemble for the 1946-1947 season. The remaining two concerts were to be given by artists from the local area. Two hundred and thirteen members subscribed to the series, which consisted of six concerts, three by the Pasquier String Trio (three different programs on two successive days) and one each by the other three groups. The second year was a popular as well as a financial success.

Surprisingly, the third year, 1947-1948, proved a great disappointment. An English duo (a soprano and a contralto), a recital by a French baritone accompanied by a local string quartet and piano, and two programs by the Pascal String Quartet did not rouse the interest of the potential audience. By January 1948, only 127 subscriptions had been sold, a drop of 40 percent from the previous year! The season ended with a deficit of $475. In a notice sent out to subscribers Professor Nelson emphasized that he had to sell 200 subscriptions to have a viable series and asked whether the Chamber Arts Society should continue. The result was a resounding “Yes,” and the subject has never come up again.
At this time the decision was made to begin selling subscriptions for the following season in the spring, a procedure which was intended to ensure that adequate funds would be available to offset all anticipated expenditures. It also meant that all contracts for the coming season would have to be negotiated early, and that potential subscribers would know in advance the nature of the programs for which they would be paying.

The announcement for the year 1948-1949 was the first which offered concerts exclusively by touring ensembles. Musicians from the local area, however, would still continue to participate from time to time. The number of concerts given would be limited to either three or four, depending on the amount of money brought in by subscriptions and the sale of guest tickets. Three concerts were scheduled for the 1948-1949 season. For the first by the London String Quartet, in October, the Society received a $300 grant toward the artists’ fee from the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation of the Library of Congress. The Hungarian Quartet performed in December and the series closed with a return engagement of the Pasquier String Trio on January 22, 1949. The subscription fee was $6.00. Unfortunately, there are no financial reports for this year; but the result must have been more than satisfactory, because the number of concerts was increased from three to four for the 1949-1950 season:

- November 5: Hungarian String Quartet
- November 17: Alexander Schneider, violin, and Ralph Kirkpatrick, harpsichord
- January 21: Paganini String Quartet
- April 14: Alma Trio (violin, cello, piano)

A Chapel Hill resident and friend of Ernest Nelson must be singled out and recognized for her supportive role in the growth of the Chamber Arts Society. Mrs. Johnnie Burnham, co-founder of the North Carolina Symphony Orchestra, was devoted to musical causes. She was responsible for spreading the word about the Durham series and helping to draw the Chapel Hill contingent into the important role it still plays in the Society. To this day, based on the statistics for the 1994-1995 season, approximately half of all subscribers to the series still come from Chapel Hill.

The 1949-1950 season ended with a surplus of $150: 190 subscriptions were sold and the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation awarded a second grant, this time of $250. Membership rose to 225 in 1952-1953 and to over 300 in 1954-1955. There were no more deficits; the average carry-over amount was $300-400.

The Chamber Arts Society was and has remained a culturally vital and financially viable society with a loyal, devoted audience.
Then came the halcyon days. From 1955 to 1961 the number of concerts was increased to five per season; from 1961 to 1971 it was further raised to six. Membership increased beyond 300 in the mid-fifties as the demand for guest tickets continued to rise. Because of its size and outstanding acoustics, the East Duke Music room was a unique facility for chamber music. It permitted an intimacy between performers and audience which an auditorium lacks. Time and again, a magical rapport would be established between listeners and artists in that hall and the music would lift the audience to new heights. Many of the musicians said it was one of the finest halls they had ever experienced. However, the Music Room’s normal seating capacity was limited to 350; as attendance rose, a game of musical chairs had to be initiated. Many long-term members will still remember the increased intimacy when rows were narrowed, seats pushed close together, and the big wooden chairs brought in from the old chapel at the opposite end of the hallway. On concert Saturdays, Professor Nelson and his helpers would set up the Music Room, and on Sunday the chairs would be put back in order, a labor of love to which none of us objected. As long as subscriptions and guest ticket sales permitted us to seat 400 plus listeners, we did not worry about finances; but we knew the day would come when, due to the increase in artists’ fees, a larger membership and therefore a larger hall would be required.

Ernest W. Nelson
with members of the
Hungarian String Quartet, 1954
My wife and I came to Durham in the fall of 1961. One of my top priorities upon arriving was to seek out Professor Nelson and join the Chamber Arts Society, for I had been informed about the series before moving here and knew all subscriptions would be sold out before the first concert. For $10.00 each we received season tickets for the following six concerts:

- Amadeus Quartet
- Quinotto Chigiano (piano quintet)
- Pasquier String Trio
- Hungarian Quartet
- Paul Doktor and Yaltah Menuhin (viola and piano)
- New York String Sextet

We were overwhelmed by the high quality of the Chamber Arts concerts and could not understand how it was possible to charge so little for such outstanding artists. I learned that, aside from some administrative expenses, all available funds were used for one purpose only—to pay artists’ fees. The University did not charge for the use of the East Duke Music Room; the university printer informed us that he considered the printing of the program to be his contribution to the cultural life of the community; and volunteers and committee members did most of the necessary tasks for which help would normally have been hired.

As one of these volunteers, I became better acquainted with Ernest, and he gradually drew me into his confidence. In the fall of 1963, anxious to begin sharing his burden even more, he sponsored me for the newly created post of Director of the Chamber Arts Society. I was duly elected and thus began one of the most enjoyable assignments I have ever undertaken. It was a great joy to work closely with Ernest until his death in 1974, and it was a privilege to play a role in furthering the cause of chamber music in our area, a project to which he had so selflessly devoted himself.

Professor Nelson’s participation in the affairs of the Chamber Arts Society was sorely missed. The 1974-1975 season was dedicated to him and the Fine Arts Quartet opened their program and the season by playing in his memory the Cavatina from Beethoven’s Op. 130.

The title of Chairman of the Chamber Arts Society which Professor Nelson had held since 1963, when I was elected Director, lapsed with his death. I continued to serve as coordinator and program director for five more years. As chairman of the German Department at Duke it was, however, not possible for me to devote myself to all aspects of the Chamber Arts Society as completely as Professor Nelson had done. In 1975 therefore, with advice and assistance from the Chancellor, John Blackburn, the Society was put under the aegis of Duke University in
order to simplify the handling of financial and administrative matters. The Chamber Arts Society was at first under the direct control of the Chancellor’s office and transferred to the Office of Cultural Affairs.

The transfer of the Society to Duke involved merging the Ernest Nelson Fund, which had been established in 1965, with a small performing arts fund Chancellor Blackburn had set up in his office in 1971. The resulting entity was named the Ernest W. Nelson Endowment Fund for the Performing Arts. Since 1976, the Society has received an annual grant from this fund for partial support of one concert beginning with the Cleveland Quartet in April of that year.

By 1979 the press of family and professional obligations forced me to resign as Director—not, however, before we had found an eminently qualified successor. When Ruth Blum agreed to assume the position of Director, I was especially pleased, knowing that she would not only continue to maintain the high standards Professor Nelson had established, but would also have a deep personal concern for and commitment to the well-being of the guest artists. The first sixteen years of her tenure as Director have been marked by many noteworthy accomplishments and events, a few of which I would like to mention.

One of her first priorities upon assuming her new responsibilities in the fall of 1979 was to enlist the help of George Williams in instituting a campaign to have the East Duke Music Room renamed to honor the founder of the Chamber Arts Society. Thanks to George Williams’ enthusiasm and dedication, the process was successfully completed well before the opening of the following season. The first concert in the fall of 1980 by Ruth Laredo and Raphael Hillyer was dedicated to Ernest Nelson and celebrated the renaming of the hall and unveiling of a special plaque.

When the construction of the Bryan Center entered its final stage, Ruth began making arrangements to move the chamber music concerts from East Campus to the new facility. The cramped quarters of the Nelson Room were no longer viable; the hall simply could not accommodate a large enough audience to support the quality concerts which the audience expected and deserved. In 1982, the series left the friendly intimacy of the Nelson Room for the more formal Reynolds Auditorium, a move which permitted the Society to welcome over 200 new members to its ranks. During this period, a working partnership developed between the Chamber Arts Society and the Duke Office of Cultural Affairs under the directorship of Susan Coon.
In October 1986, Ruth booked a chamber ensemble which formed a bridge to the past. In January 1947, Ernest Nelson had engaged the Pasquier Trio for its first of many concerts over the years. In October 1987, forty years later, the Pasquier Trio returned again, but with changes. Ernest’s old friends had retired long ago; this time two of the musicians were sons of Pierre Pasquier, friend of Ernest Nelson and founder of the original trio.

1994 was a red-letter year for Ruth and the Chamber Arts Society. A generous anonymous member established an endowment fund for the society and named it for one of our distinguished members who celebrated her 90th birthday that same year: The Edith London Chamber Arts Endowment Fund. The dedicatee, a noted painter who has resided in Durham since 1935, was a close friend of Ernest Nelson and a founding member of the Chamber Arts Society. Income from this fund will be used to support the Chamber Arts Society’s activities. It is hoped that all members will consider contributing to this fund as their means permit so that we can maintain the excellence to which we have become accustomed.
A note from the Director

We are proud of the contribution the Chamber Arts Society has made to the cultural life of the Triangle Area with the continued high quality of concerts at as affordable a price as possible.

I want to thank Leland Phelps for the marvelous job he has done in preparing this history of the Chamber Arts Society. I also am indebted to Lee for all the help and guidance he has extended to me over the years. Thanks also to Professor Horst Meyer whose devotion over these past 15 years has been invaluable. The success of the Chamber Arts Society is due to a team effort and I thank all committee members past and present as well as the Duke students who have so faithfully served as ushers. And finally, my thanks to Susan Coon for all the support she has provided our organization.

In 50 years we have never disappointed an audience and have always presented a full season. We treasure the lasting relationships that have developed with many fine artists and ensembles. As we continue our fine heritage, we can look forward to another 50 years of wonderful performances.

—Ruth M. Blum