

MacDowell Club of Milwaukee Celebrates

In May 1999, the MacDowell Club of Milwaukee celebrates 90 continuously active years. It sustains its original dedication and purpose; that is to further music interest in Milwaukee and to provide incentive for progressive work for amateur and professional musicians. Performing members give monthly recitals and, combining efforts with Associate members, sustain a scholarship fund for aspiring musicians and singers. The Club's work also acquaints the public with the many excellent local musicians.

Organized on May 8, 1909, the Club had a charter membership of 40 women. For many years it flourished as an important resource in the greater Milwaukee area, providing performing opportunities for serious, talented musicians. At one time the membership listed 500 active and student members. Present membership of 200 still provides rich performance opportunities.

Study groups began in 1937 in strings, voice and piano ensemble and repertory .Within 50 years the Club had a student section, The MacDowell Chorus, and an all-woman orchestra, both very active in the greater Milwaukee music scene. Notable performances by the Chorus included Menotti's Old Maid and the Thief, and his opera, The Telephone. The Orchestra gave a series of concerts in the former Layton Art Gallery, made several tours, and in 1924 presented a concert in New York City. It is believed that this group played the American premier performance of Saint-Saen's Carnival of the Animals. The MacDowell Singers performed Debussy's Three Nocturnes with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at the Pabst Theatre. The MacDowell Club's home bases included the Athenaeum until 1935. Next, performances were held at The Milwaukee Art Institute, Milwaukee Downer College, a studio on Broadway, the Bradford Music Company, and the College Women's Club from 1966-1980. Then the Athenaeum (known as the Woman's Club of Wisconsin) from 1980 until June of 1994. Currently, its programs are held at the beautifully decorated Broadway Theatre Center, in the Historic Third Ward.

Significant events of the last four decades have continued to stimulate the interest of contemporary musicians. The MacDowell Club sponsored the appearance of Claudette Sorel, pianist, to play the MacDowell Piano Concerto with the Milwaukee Symphony in 1961. An entire program of MacDowell's music performed on November 14, 1961 celebrated the centennial of his birth. Gerald Moore, the renowned English accompanist, was brought to Milwaukee for a lecture, recital and workshop in The Art of Accompaniment in 1963. The same year the Club gave a luncheon in honor of George Kendall, General Director of the MacDowell Colony. In 1968 a nativity chorale, Wondrous Love, was presented both in a club concert and at Bay Shore Lutheran Church. The MacDowell Club members made up the entire cast, including the director and instrumentalists.

To celebrate its 60th anniversary in 1969, the MacDowell Club commissioned Louise Talma to write a work premiered by the Milwaukee Symphony, under the baton of Kenneth Schermerhorn. Her work, The Tolling Bell, was sung by William Metcalf of the New York Opera and was later nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

The 1970s and 1980s featured many original programs: a Music Fair for the scholarship fund, a recital by James Tocco dedicating the newly acquired Steinway grand piano, concerts featuring the two pianos at the College Women's Club, some delightful lighter works from Broadway shows and many other unusual presentations.

On May 6, 1980 a program entitled Musical Fashions Through the Decades was presented at the Villa Terrace. Historical descriptions of each era were printed in the program. Actual fashions were displayed courtesy of the Milwaukee County Historical Society and Patricia Stevens Career College and Finishing School. In 1980 the MacDowell Club accepted the first male members into the performing division of the club, eliminating the men's auxiliary.

For the 75th anniversary in 1984, the Club commissioned a work written by Dr. John Downey, the internationally recognized composer, honorary member of the Club and mentor to generations of University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee students where he taught since 1964. The world premiere of this, a piano trio was performed by cellist Loren Brown and violinist Leonard Sorkin with Dr. Downey at the keyboard. It received excellent reviews and has held additional noteworthy performances since.

The MacDowell Club began a scholarship competition program in 1985 for serious advanced musicians to help further their careers. Aspiring instrumentalists between the ages of 17 and 28 and vocalists between the ages of 20 and 30 audition in front of a panel of judges. The competition takes place once per year and scholarship award winners perform at one of the MacDowell Club programs. Another competition is held for composers.

In the 1990s the Club enjoyed programs by Honorary Member, the Most Reverend Rembert G. Weakland, describing his research on medieval chant; John Downey's 70th birthday, with many of his works performed; an informative talk by Steven Ovitsky, Vice President and Executive Director of the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra; and programs exhibiting the excellent musical abilities of Scholarship winners, and club members.

Monthly programs include a broad classical repertoire, chamber music, light opera, musical favorites, original compositions, as well as vocal and instrumental ensembles. The MacDowell Club is dedicated to furthering its goals of musical excellence in performance by its members or local vocalists and musicians.