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Young Blood

For 22 years, the Eastern Shore Chamber Music Festival has brought great music to Talbot County, Maryland. Nurtured by artistic directors Marcy Rosen and J. Lawrie Bloom, and sustained by an active, enthusiastic board, the festival presents a series of concerts over two weekends in June in some of the seaside area's most picturesque venues. But a few years ago, board member Arnold Lerman started worrying about the musical preferences of ESCMF's audiences.

"We're looking at audiences who are used to 18th and 19th-century music," says Lerman. "They aren't in tune with the way music was changing and with what was happening in our music schools."

Lerman's solution: A competition for young ensembles, held under the festival's auspices. The competition would not only bring new area audiences to chamber music; it would also give support to young musicians. It's a concern that's close to Lerman's heart: Although he's a lawyer by profession, he has played violin his whole life, and has always counted musicians among his closest friends. "Where are our future musicians coming from?" he asks. "How can we encourage them?"

When he first presented his idea to ESCMF, Lerman encountered a bit of resistance from his fellow board members. The worry was that the competition might drain resources from the festival itself. But Lerman promised that his fundraising wouldn't step on the festival's turf. He formed a competition committee, consisting of himself and two other ESCMF board members, Anna Larkin and Patricia Barbis. The competition also received key early support from Marcy Rosen. Just three weeks before the application deadline for the first competition, the "troika" staged a chamber concert in a board member's house. The event was successful beyond anyone's dreams, raising funds to cover the first competition, with some left over to start the second one.

The Chesapeake Chamber Music Competition has now had two biennial outings, with a third edition scheduled for March, 2008. The competition is open to ensembles of all varieties: "I felt very strongly that it ought to be any combination of instruments, even those that are a mite unusual, because music is developing that way," says Lerman. In fact, the first winner was Exit 9, a percussion group. (The David Trio, a piano trio from Italy, won the 2006 event.) The only restriction for entry is that a group's average age must be under 31.

Even though the competition hands out substantial prizes—\$10,000 to the winners, \$5,000 to the second-place ensemble—its goal isn't just disbursing cash, but also throwing a spotlight on its young participants. The winners of the 2008 competition will play at the opening concert of the next Eastern Shore festival, and then, over the following weekend, for two neighboring presenters: the Candlelight Concert Society and the Chincoteague Cultural Alliance. Moreover, the competition itself is heavily attended by presenters, providing valuable exposure to all of the finalists.

The competition in its first two outings has turned into a local hit, with people staying through the whole marathon event to hear every ensemble play its 40-minute set. "Right from the start, the community fell in love with the event," says Lerman. "A lot of people in the community are scared of the words 'chamber music.' What this shows them is that chamber music is more than 18th and 19th-century music, and old graying people sitting there. The minute you say you're dealing with young people, a whole different dynamic develops." www.musicontheshore.org
www.chambermusiccompetition.org



ITALY'S DAVID TRIO, WINNER OF THE CHESAPEAKE COMPETITION