

# The News Tribune

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## A taste for good music

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Five years ago, Tacoma husband-and-wife musicians Tim Christie and Maria Sampen happened to tour Walla Walla during a rare free weekend. Drawn to the beauty of the place, they began to ask how they could get invited to play in the chamber music festival there – only to find there wasn't one. So they started one themselves.

Now, the Walla Walla Chamber Music Festival – which runs through June 22 – not only brings world-class musicians to a beautiful location, it breaks classical music bounds with creative programming, winery and bar venues, free concerts, and a deep connection to the local community.

"I realized there was a real need," says Christie, a violist who along with Sampen, a violinist, teaches at the University of Puget Sound and plays in many regional and national ensembles. "People were going to Walla Walla for wine-tasting and cycling, but there wasn't the cultural infrastructure. It felt like Aspen 30 years ago, or Tanglewood 80 years ago. The music scene was mostly around (Whitman College) ... there was a dearth of programming. I thought that if I could bring in a high level of performance, people would run with it."

And they have. Since Christie and Sampen's first concert in September 2007, their summer festival has grown each year, exploring new venues and building audiences to the point that many concerts sell out. They've even added a winter festival over the Martin Luther King Jr. Day weekend, playing to similarly full houses.

They've done it by spilling classical music into everything from theater to wine-tasting in a way that connects audiences to the music.

Take the main stage Festival Series. Held in the new Power House Theater, an old brick electricity station converted into a theater with a thrust stage that places musicians right in the middle of the audience, the four-concert series opens with a new piece from New Zealand composer Christopher Gendall for piano, soprano saxophone and violin. It goes on to honor the theater's original Shakespearean intentions with British composer Gordon Jacob's "Six Shakespearean Sketches," inspired by passages from the Bard which will be read aloud during the performance. The concert ends with a chamber music classic: Brahms' "Quintet in B Minor for Clarinet and Strings Op. 115."

"The Gendall will be the most adventurous of all our modern music; the audience will find it difficult," says Christie bluntly. "And that's as much a part of our purpose as Brahms. We want our programs to reflect our time. And I think listening to old music is enhanced by listening to new music."

The rest of the Festival Series continues in the same vein: quintets and trios by Mendelssohn, Schubert and Brahms paired with Stravinsky's "L'Histoire du Soldat," folk-fusion composition by American Evan Chambers, and another world premiere, this time by Marilyn Shrude, a renowned American composer (and Sampen's mother).

Then there are the winery concerts: one-hour, pre-dinner events in local wineries that explore one of the festival series' pieces in greater depth, teasing it apart with examples and conversation by the musicians before a final play-through. That festival-goers like the combination of wine-tasting, casual seating and classical music is obvious – the 125-seat venues are the first to sell out.

The festival also features free rehearsals and outreach concerts in community venues such as schools, libraries and senior centers. There's also the annual Collage concert, which juxtaposes old and contemporary works in a rapid-fire succession at the hipster Jimgermanbar in the nearby one-stoplight-town of Waitsburg. Along with theme-and-variation works from Paganini to George Rochberg, the concert even has a signature cocktail: the glowing "Tango Sureale," created by bartender Jim German and named after one of

the pieces.

Christie and Sampen, known around the country not only for their high level of technique and musicianship but their performance of contemporary compositions in ensembles such as Brave New Works, think they've hit on a good way to present challenging new music.

"People can take in modern, difficult music much better in (a relaxed bar) situation than a traditional stage," Christie says. "We're expanding the audience's strike zone, to use a baseball metaphor. We're presenting contemporary music in a way that they're able to listen to."

The final ingredient to a fun festival, say Christie and Sampen, are the musicians themselves. Some, like Shrude and sax soloist John Sampen, who is Maria Sampen's father, are actual family members. Others are friends and colleagues Christie and Sampen have worked with in other ensembles. The main criterion, other than exemplary skill and artistry, is that they be willing to engage the audience.

"An unfortunate number of musicians will just blow in for the gig, stay in their hotel, and blow out again," Christie acknowledges. "We are looking for good players who'll interact with the audience."

These players include pianist Oksana Ezhokina, clarinetist Kevin Schempf, cellist Norbert Lewandowski and the Icicle Creek Piano Trio.

And so, in addition to being an injection of vitality for Walla Walla's summer tourist season, the Walla Walla Chamber Music Festival has become a way for locals and visitors to connect with chamber music, rather than just passively listening to it.

"I think the festival brings music to people from every walk of life, every experience level," says Sampen. "We play in the library, in farm laborer homes, in the airport. We're letting people experience music on their own terms. Since chamber music is so portable, we can integrate into the community – and now the community has embraced us. There's a great reciprocal sense of joy."

#### WALLA WALLA CHAMBER MUSIC FESTIVAL

When: June 7-22

Where: Various venues in the Eastern Washington community of Walla Walla

Tickets: Main series \$20/\$8, winery series \$15, children and community events free, Gold Pass \$120

Information: 800-838-3006, [wwcmf.org](http://wwcmf.org) (<http://wwcmf.org>)

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