



The Green Music Center's Petaluma connection

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John O'Hara/ For the Argus-Courier

Petaluma composer Nolan Gasser's original piece, "The Sonoma Overture," was performed by the Santa Rosa Symphony at the Green Music Center recently.

When the Green Music Center opened at Sonoma State University this September, it was music to the ears of many Petalumans who provided critical support during the sometimes-turbulent, 15-year journey to realizing the state-of-the-art facility.

In 1997, a dream was born: To see a 1,400-seat, acoustically perfect concert hall built at Sonoma State University. But the dream was costly — \$145 million — and Petaluma music lovers were among the first to pitch in.

“Clover-Stornetta Farms and Lace House Linen were among the first Petaluma businesses to contribute money to the GMC,” says Anne Benedetti, who served on the fundraising committee for the center and whose husband Dan is president of Clover-Stornetta. Anne Benedetti's father-in-law Gene was active in SSU and the music center as well, prior to his death in 2006.

Her musical background was one reason she got involved in the project.

“I was singing in the Sonoma Bach Choir at SSU along with Donald and Maureen Green,” Benedetti says. “There was no choral room with good acoustics and Don had the vision to say, ‘Let’s build a choral hall.’”

Benedetti was also a member of the Santa Rosa Symphony board at the time. Because the musicians could not hear each other at the Wells Fargo Center in Santa Rosa, they found it difficult to stay in tune, a source of frustration for all, including now Conductor Laureate, Jeffrey Kahane.

Says Benedetti, “That’s about the time (SSU President Ruben Arminana) started taking people back to Tanglewood in Massachusetts and said, ‘I think we should have one of those,’ meaning a model like [Seiji] Osawa Hall. And that’s how the project started to grow.”

Twelve years ago this week, the groundbreaking for the center took place. Although economic downturns, construction overruns, and a bit of backstage disharmony intervened, many Petalumans have been strong supporters over the long haul.

Carol Libarle, wife of Lace House Linen owner Dan Libarle, served on the fundraising committee for the center.

“Even when Petaluma donors were tapped out, I never lost faith that we would raise the money,” she said.

The Green Music Center finally opened on Sept. 29, and with ample contributions from Petalumans.

Lagunitas Brewery and Three Twins Ice Cream, for example, co-sponsored the grand opening weekend barbecue, while a local bluegrass band, The Brothers Comatose, entertained the crowd.

A Petaluman even produced a new composition that was greeted with a standing ovation.

On opening night, Petaluma composer Nolan Gasser sat in the audience of the center’s Weill Hall with his parents, wife and children, listening to the world premiere of his composition, “The Sonoma Overture.”

“It was a mix of excitement and terror,” he confesses.

The overture was performed by the Santa Rosa Symphony under the baton of its maestro, Bruno Ferrandis, who had commissioned the work from Gasser.

Musically speaking, it put Sonoma County on the map. The music critic for the San Francisco Chronicle called Gasser’s overture, “bustling and atmospheric,”

while The New York Times described it as a “10-minute easygoing and energetic piece in a Coplandesque vein.”

“I deliberately started with a fanfare section to signify the bustling energy of Sonoma County,” says Gasser. “I also referenced the natural beauty here, with the redwoods, the vineyards, the farms, with a section representing the flow of the Petaluma River. I even musically captioned Petaluma's telecom industry.”

The GMC's inaugural season seems certain to attract classical, opera, Broadway, and jazz fans from far and wide. Mayor David Glass says he looks forward to attending some of these events himself and that he hopes the center will draw out-of-towners to nearby Petaluma as well.

“An attraction such as this is a welcome addition, and intuitively I'm sure it will have a positive impact to the region, including Petaluma,” Glass says. “However, I haven't seen studies that would quantify such an impact.”

“I don't think we need studies,” says Carol Libarle. “I think we need faith in what we have here in Petaluma. The GMC has exceeded all our expectations. I think once people discover it, they will discover Petaluma too and love it.”

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