

Michigan

Kerrytown Concert House founder passes the torch after 30 years



Deanna Relyea and Lynne Aspnes pose for a photograph on stage at the Kerrytown Concert House. (Melanie Maxwell / The Ann Arbor News)



By **Jennifer Eberbach** | Special to The Ann Arbor News
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Thirty years after founding Kerrytown Concert House, Deanna Relyea is passing the torch to a new director. Lynne Aspnes takes the helm as the concert house's milestone season commences. Here are some reflections on three decades of concerts, recitals, music education, and community involvement in KCH.

Relyea, who plans to stay on as Artistic Director for a while, founded KCH in 1984. Originally, she was in search of a place to teach her piano and voice students. She had not thought to start a performance venue, but the stars aligned and KCH was born.

"When I found the house, the space ended up determining what could go on there," Relyea says.

Originally a single-family home, built before the 1860s, developer Carl Brauer had purchased the property. His original intention was to tear it down for parking near his office building on the corner of 5th and Catherine.

"The city and neighborhood wouldn't let him tear it down because it is an historic, so he came up with a plan to restore it. It was being restored when he showed it to me," Relyea says.

"I hadn't really thought of doing a concert hall, but the space told me what business could go on there. In the downstairs space, a few walls were torn down and the ceiling was lifted," which became the concert hall, she says.

"And there were four bedrooms upstairs that could be rented out as teaching studios or arts offices," she says. Original Street Art Fair, Ann Arbor Symphony, and the former Washtenaw Council for the Arts were early tenants there.

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No doubt her gamble paid off, but in the beginning "decisions were made on the fly," which was "sort of scary," Relyea says.

"I went home after signing a five-year lease and had a panic attack, then I got to work," she says. KCH later bought the house.

She trusted her gut feeling that Ann Arbor needed a venue like KCH, and was pleased by the outpouring of community support in those early days.

"There was no professional space like this one that was accessible to people outside of the university -- at that time I was thinking classical music. With all of the creative artists living here, we needed something like this," she says.

KCH became a go-to spot for not only classical music but other genres as well, including cabaret, jazz and many other genres. Variety was a characteristic of KCH's programming, right off the bat.

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In September of 1984, KCH commenced performances with two galas organized by famous husband and wife duo Bill Bolcom (pianist and composer) and Joan Morris (mezzo-soprano), who both taught at UM.

"We had a variety in those first shows -- classical, cabaret, folk, jazz, poetry -- to show that the concert house would be open to all kinds of music," Bolcom remembers. "With the new venture, it was important to cast a wide net. I was so excited about the mix then, and I'm still excited about it," he says.

"We ended up recording two albums with RCA there, because it was such a perfect setting," Morris says. "Other albums, we've tried them out at Kerrytown first to see how they would resonate with the audience," says Morris, a current KCH board member. "Deanna has always been wonderful to us," she says.

Bolcom and Morris are among the performers at KCH's annual "Parisian Soiree," this Saturday, September 20, which has sold out. Relyea (mezzo soprano) and Aspnes (harp) will also perform. Other performers include Gabe Bolkosky (violin), Michele Cooker (piano), Jane Schoonmaker-Rodgers (soprano), Kevin Bylsma (piano), Roger Chard (baritone), Maurita Holland (piano), Shahida Nurullah (jazz vocalist), Ian Greenlaw (baritone), Jean Schneider (piano), Tad Weed (piano), Emily Benner (soprano), Monica Swartout-Bebow (mezzo-soprano).

Another early memory that stands out in Relyea's mind is buying the model "C" Hamburg Steinway piano, which has "been a real centerpiece, an attraction for musicians. People come from all over the world to play it," she says.

She traveled to London to purchase it from Steinway Hall, in 1988. "It was traded in by some wealthy industrialist's wife, who wanted a piano with a shiny finish instead of matte. Her bad taste was our gain," Relyea laughs.

As Aspnes takes over, she is pleased to inherit the task of sustaining KCH's reputation. The harpist and former longtime UM teacher and administrator's history with KCH dates back almost to the beginning.

"I started teaching at UM in the fall of 1985, and someone recommended I set up a concert with Deanna," Aspnes remembers. She gave the first harp recital ever held at KCH, in January of 1986, and went on to organize annual "Harp Heaven" ensemble concerts for a number of years.

Aspnes feels ready for the leadership role because organizing and leading people are things "I've done all my life," she says. "When I was probably 25 years old, I ran a concert series for the American Harp Society, booked the artists and venues. From that experience on, I've always liked being bossy. I'm a bossy boss, which is probably why I ended up teaching," she laughs.

Aspnes founded the American Harp Center in Petoskey a couple years ago, and she recently worked at Arizona State University before returning to Michigan.

"My first responsibility is to understand completely what is successful and not focus too much in the beginning on change for the sake of change," Aspnes says.

"In the future, I'd like to see the concert house's audience grow, reach deeper into the community, and engage other communities outside of Ann Arbor in what it is that we have to offer. Its visibility and reputation with musicians outside of Ann Arbor is staggering for a cute, little house," Aspnes says. "I want to build on that."

Relyea thinks that "it will be a smooth transition," she says.

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