

arts & entertainment

By
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Belmont: A best-kept secret

Did you know that Nashville is home to the largest private-college music school in the Southeast? Did you know that its music faculty and student groups give over 160 public concerts a year, and are featured in broadcasts on local public television and radio? I'm not talking about Vanderbilt's Blair School of Music; I'm talking about a best-kept Nashville secret, the School

of Music at Belmont University.

"We've been doing concerts for a long time, but just in the last several years have we had a high profile," says Assistant Dean Robert Gregg. "One thing that's made a vast difference in the concertgoing public's perception of us has been the Belmont Camerata Musicale."

The Camerata, organized by violinist Elisabeth Small in 1987

and 1988, is an ever-changing ensemble comprised of Belmont faculty. Its concerts cover the standard chamber-music repertoire, from the baroque era through the 20th century, with a frequent emphasis on more modern works, particularly by living composers. The instrumental and vocal makeup of the group changes from concert to concert, depending on the pieces

selected. Another quite unique aspect of the Camerata is its concert hall, the Grand Salon of the historic Belmont Mansion, which has been maintained in its original antebellum sumptuousness. "That's our residence," said Small in a 1989 interview. "There is a wonderful kind of intimacy about it. Adelia Acklen was a grand entertainer who gave famous parties. She also brought in very famous musical artists down through the 19th century, so we are continuing a tradition." The group has also performed at several Summer Lights festivals and in regional concerts, and members have been involved in performer-and composer-in-residence programs throughout the Southeast.

The Camerata got a big boost last year from WDCN Channel 8, when it began to include Belmont Camerata performances in its six-year-old *Recital Hall* series, which previously had only featured performances by Blair School of Music faculty. *Recital Hall's* next season of Sunday episodes begins in May and will run through September 1992, and will also include performances from Belmont's ongoing Faculty Concert Series, showcasing particular musicians.

"As far as the other areas," Gregg continues, "we've always had pretty good attendance at student ensemble performances, especially in the area of commercial music and jazz. That's been a good area because Blair just doesn't have that." At Belmont, its 250 music students can major not only in classical music but also in commercial and pop styles, and have been admitted to study such non-traditional instruments as mandolin and pedal-steel guitar.

"I think our faculty feels very strongly that we have a unique place here," says Acting Dean Cynthia Curtis. "We have a unique setting and a great deal of diversity. We're not really

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interested in trying to play our strengths and weaknesses off against another school. Our thrust has been in the education of college students. In cooperation with that, we've had an opportunity to provide enrichment for the community. Now I think we're shifting to try to balance that a little more, trying to see our role in the community in a stronger way."

For that reason, Belmont decided to make all faculty recitals, and most student recitals, free to the public. In addition, Belmont invites public attendance to its many master classes, seminars and workshops on topics ranging from pop music performance to music education and church music.

The Belmont faculty is particularly excited about the impending release of an album project featuring 70 minutes of recordings from a staggering array of Belmont student groups, including bluegrass, big band jazz, choral chamber music, 20th century avant garde classical, rock contemporary, Christian pop, and orchestra. The impetus for the project came from Donna Hilley, a Belmont supporter and senior vice president and chief executive officer of Sony Music's giant Tree Publishing. "She had approached us last spring about the possibility of working with us on a recording project," says

Curtis. "We went to see her in August, and she was quite serious about it. At this point, the recording is virtually complete. We'll premiere it at our President's Concert on March 7. It will be a wonderful PR vehicle for Belmont, and it's been a good experience for the students. We're proud of Sony's corporate sponsorship."

For a listing of all Belmont School of Music concerts, call 386-INFO. You can also receive its monthly *Music News* newsletter by calling 385-6408. ❖