

# Lifestyles

Charlottesville, Virginia

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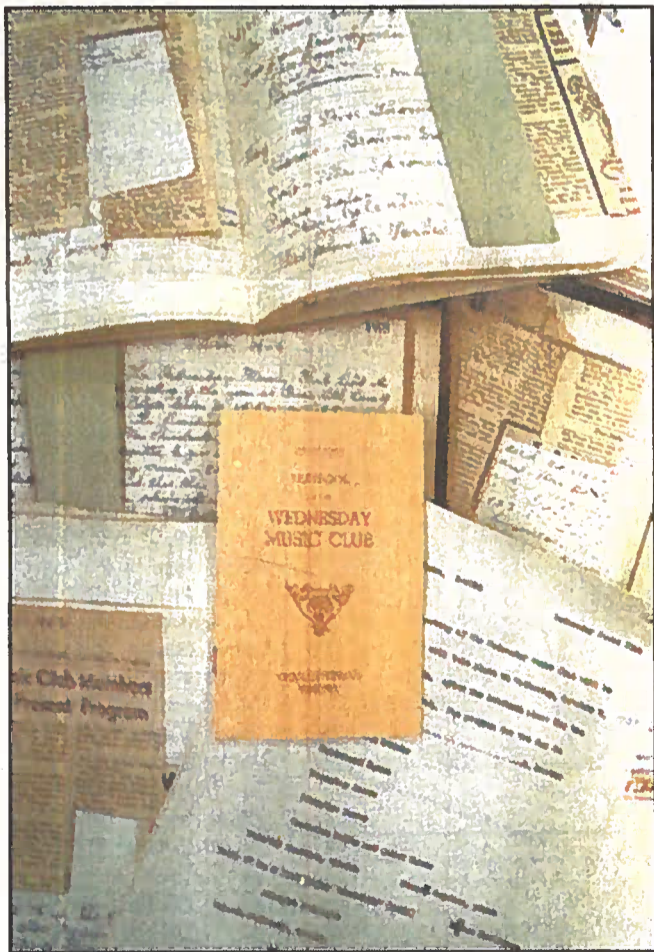
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Meda Tilman reflects on the 75th anniversary of the Wednesday Music Club.

What started on the 'maid's day in' has segued into

## 900 Wednesdays of noteworthy music



Wednesday Music Club's archives are kept in the Special Collections Department of UVa's Alderman Library. Club notes, schedules, newspaper clippings, yearbooks and minutes from the meetings are now a part of history.

By DAVID A. MAURER  
Daily Progress staff writer

It was one of those unexpected evening knocks at the door that makes people jump. They generally bode ill.

When Meda Tilman answered the door of her Hilltop Road home, she was informed by a representative of the court that she was on jury duty the following day. She stepped back from the door and with a gesture of her hand toward the parlor let the caller see why the request was completely out of the question.

"I said I was sorry, but I was having a meeting of the Wednesday Music Club the next morning," Mrs. Tilman said with a smile and a I-can't-believe-I-said-that shake of her head.

"I pointed at all the chairs I had set up in the living room as proof. I guess that convinced him, because I was given a notice that allowed me to do it at another time."

One might wonder if such an absolu-

tion would be given out today by the courts. Certainly things were simpler back in the days when the Wednesday Music Club was small enough to hold its monthly get-togethers in members' homes.

Today, the club is so large that its 75th anniversary dinner on Oct. 9 will be at the Omni Charlottesville Hotel. Entertainment will be provided by classical guitarist Keith Stevens.

Many things have changed since the club's formative years, but music remains the centerpiece around which the club revolves.

When the late Irene Valentine got together with seven of her women friends back in 1923 to start the Wednesday Music Club, their expectations were small. The goal was simply to share their love of music with one another.

In a music-loving city like Charlottesville, it didn't take long for the idea to catch on. By the late 1920s, the club's membership more than quadrupled.

By the time Mrs. Tilman joined the

club in 1938, there were nearly 100 members. This posed somewhat of a problem for the hostesses.

"Many years ago we would hold our meetings in the parlors of the Hill and Wood Furniture Company," said Mrs. Tilman. "I have served as the club's president for 15 years and have been with the club longer than any other member."

"Then for years, we held our meetings in a very nice upstairs room at the Omni Hotel. Wherever we met, very little business was conducted."

"We got into the music program as soon as possible, because that's what we were there for. We would have someone play an instrument or have someone sing."

Clearly, the club wasn't in it for any monetary gains. When first formed the dues were \$1.25 a year.

In 1929 the annual fee was raised to \$1.50, where it remained for many years. Current dues are \$15 a year. Although money wasn't mu-

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consideration, bringing new talent into the club was. Mrs. Tilman said whenever people with musical talents moved to town, they could expect a call from a representative of the club.

One of the club's best finds was Winnifred Bogert, a professional singer from Chicago. In June 1946, she and well-known Virginia composer John Powell presented a concert at Rosalie Thornton's home on University Circle.

The composer played the piano while Bogert sang selections of his works. Bogert and Mrs. Tilman often performed together.

"Winnifred had done a lot of opera in the Chicago area," said Mrs. Tilman who, as a young woman, had studied voice in Florence, Italy, under the direction of Senorita Bastianini.

"When Winnifred came down here, we did a lot of Gilbert and Sullivan things together. For many years, I was a member of a chorus group and we would practice faithfully every week.

"I had joined the club because I had wanted to sing, and it certainly gave me the opportunity to do that. But now when I think back on my years with the club, I think of all the many wonderful friends I made because of it."

Today, the Wednesday Music Club's membership roll is crowding 150 and its once all-female ranks now include men. As the club grew, holding meetings in people's homes was no longer practical.

The club now meets on the first Wednesday of each month, October through May, at the Kappa Sigma Auditorium on U.S. 250. As the club's membership grew, so did its sphere of musical interests and endeavors.

**Study group**

When the club reached its 10th birthday, the idea of including a musical study group was instituted. The year 1933 was devoted to the study of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven.

Each year a different theme would be introduced. In 1949 the group concentrated on learning more about music from other countries.

The post-World War II years found the members taking steps to encourage music among the young people in the area. In 1948, club members began an effort to convince school board members to include the teaching of stringed instruments in city schools.

The suggestion fell on receptive ears and, in the fall of 1949, the school board elected to include the teaching of stringed instruments in the regular school courses at Venable, Clark and McGuffey elementary schools.

The free lessons were taught by assistant music teacher Ruth Frieschmann. To further help the fledgling program, club members began an effort to supply instruments to students who didn't have their own.

By the early 1950s, more than 30 students were taking advantage of the music lessons. The majority of them were playing instruments the club had either given or loaned them.

Club members also started making donations to an instrument fund that furnished money to buy, repair, insure and recondition instruments for students. The highly successful strings program in Charlottesville schools can be traced back to the initial work of the Wednesday Music Club.

How far the program has come was illustrated this past July when the Charlottesville High School Orchestra won second place at the Youth and Music Festival in Vienna, Austria.

This growing emphasis on civic works in the 1950s and '60s resulted in club members sharing their musical talents with the community and encouraging others to discover the joy of music.



Meda Tilman, the oldest surviving member of Wednesday Music Club, joined the 15-year-old club in 1938.

The Daily Progress/Landon Nordeman



The late Irene Valentine founded the Wednesday Music Club in 1923 when she got together with seven of her friends to share their love of music.

The club helped organize a junior music festival and started a group singing program at area playgrounds. Members also presented musical programs at area hospitals and retirement homes.

**Scholarships for future musicians**

In 1959 the music club started awarding scholarships to area youngsters. Thomas Warburton was the recipient of the first \$100 check.

"The money enabled me to take organ lessons in Richmond," said Warburton, who grew up in Charlottesville and is now professor of music at the University of North Carolina.

"The scholarship encouraged me to continue to study music and allowed me to take the next step in my musical education. It was an honor to receive the gift, but what meant more to me than the money was the individual encouragement I received from the club members personally.

"They invited me to play for them right through my time at the University of Virginia. In addition, I was able to study with two of the members and a third

*"I think Irene and her friends settled on Wednesday morning because it was the maid's day in. That means the maid was at your house and you could go out because she would look after the children."*

Meda Tilman  
former president of Wednesday Music Club

coached me."

To show his appreciation for this early support and to help the club celebrate its 75th anniversary year, Warburton is scheduled to return to Charlottesville on May 9, 1999, to present a piano concert in Cabell Hall.

Since that first check was handed out, the club's scholarship program has helped many young people reach their musical goals. According to Donna Plasket, current president of the club, tuition scholarships worth about \$4,000 were distributed last year to area students who were studying privately and needed help to pay for lessons.

"There have been, over the years, endowments established by people who have been members of the club or have appreciated the work of the club," said Plasket, who is the associate director of the Women's Center at UVA.

"That has been the principal source for the funding of the students. Currently we are also giving out about \$2,500 a year in competition money.

"We hold one competition for students going to a music camp, another for high school seniors getting ready to continue to study music, and another for students in each high school grade. Judges who aren't local teachers or members of the club listen to the students play prepared pieces and they present the scholarships accordingly."

One of the most famous winners of the Wednesday Music Club's competitions is Boyd Tinsley, violinist with the Dave Matthews Band. Tinsley won the violin competition in 1980 when he was in the 10th grade at

Music students from Charlottesville and the surrounding counties are eligible for the scholarships. Plasket said part of what the club is going to be doing during its diamond anniversary year is finding ways to let more people know about their scholarship work.

"The awards we give out range from a couple of hundred dollars to \$500," Plasket said. "It's not a whole lot of money, and we would like to do more.

"The thing that really brings people into this club is working to help and encourage young musicians. I'm so proud of this club, and so pleased to be a part of something that exists with a very clear focus and strong desire to help young people.

"The club is a Charlottesville gem. It's a great privilege to be a part of a club where people who are actively engaged as musicians are also personally encouraging young people in their musical pursuits."

During the 1960s and '70s many club members would perform at local schools and answer questions as a way to encourage musical interests in the students. Ruth Ferguson, an accomplished harpsichord and piano player, was an enthusiastic participant in this effort.

"We would go out to the public schools and give performances for the children and try to encourage them to go into music as a hobby or profession," said Mrs. Ferguson, a past president of the club and a member since 1971.

"I remember disassembling my harpsichord and then reassembling it on the stage at Meriwether Lewis Elementary School so I could give a performance. I went to all the trouble because I thought very few children had ever heard a harpsichord, and I wanted to give them the opportunity.

"It wasn't that hard to disassemble, but you almost had to retune it every time you did it. Before I started playing, I gave my little speech on how the harpsichord was in existence even before the piano and how it sounded much different."

**Harpsichord fans**

When Mrs. Ferguson asked the children in the audience if any of them had ever seen a harpsichord before she was surprised to see nearly every hand go up. She was even more surprised when another show of hands indicated that almost all of them had also heard a harpsichord played.

"When I asked where they had heard and seen a harpsichord played they informed me that Lurch on the television show 'The Addams Family' played it during the show's introduction," Mrs. Ferguson said with a smile. "I felt very deflated.

"We always got interesting questions afterward. The children would ask us things like how old were we when we started playing and how often do you have to practice.

"I always tried to play down the routine that you must practice an hour every day or whatever. I would tell them that I thought a person should play when they felt like it, and play what they felt like playing, because music is supposed to be something that's enjoyed."

For 75 years, people have been setting aside one Wednesday morning a month to indulge their love of music. A question that many current members of the Wednesday Music Club might like answered is: Why Wednesday morning?

"I think Irene and her friends settled on Wednesday morning because it was the maid's day in," Mrs. Tilman said. "That means the maid was at your house and you could go out because she would look after the children.

"As the years went by, the Wednesday morning meetings became a tradition. I guess the biggest change over the years has been the growth of the club.

"They're doing marvelous work now, things we couldn't have done in the old days. I think we're very lucky to have such talented, musical people here who want to share their talents with others."