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Massapequa Philharmonic musicians to play at Museum of Art

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The Massapequa Philharmonic plays in an atrium of the Nassau County Museum of Art in East Hills. (Photo courtesy of David Bernard)

Visitors to the Nassau County Museum of Art in Roslyn will be greeted with chamber music from members of the Massapequa Philharmonic for the foreseeable future.

The collaboration was developed by David Bernard, the Philharmonic's music director, and Charles Riley, the museum's director, after the COVID-19 pandemic affected both organizations.

Bernard said that at the outset of the pandemic, the Philharmonic had to cancel concerts and other performances.

“Because of the restrictions from COVID that happened, pretty much everything on Long Island was closed down,” Bernard said in a phone interview. “You couldn’t even have outdoor concerts at that time. You couldn’t do anything.”

A Great Neck native, Bernard remembered his time in the Great Neck Symphony as a young man, where the symphony would often perform at the art museum.

“I thought, wouldn’t it be great to bring this back?” Bernard said.

He reached out to Riley with the idea.

“It took me about eight seconds to reply to that email,” Riley said in a phone interview. The orchestra held rehearsals and played a concert on the museum’s grounds in a tented area, Bernard said, and the idea met with success.

“The patrons of the museum who were there to see exhibits would wander by and stop for a few minutes and listen,” Bernard said. “They loved having live music. The desire for live music has increased, I think, during this pandemic, and we figured out a way to have this, within the safety guidelines of the state and the CDC, without an audience, but distanced and everything.”

Riley said that patrons later brought lawn chairs to watch and listen to the orchestra rehearse. “Some people were just inside the building, looking through the windows and listening to the orchestra and people were in tears,” he said. “They were so deeply moved, especially by the Mozart they played. It wasn’t formal, it was obviously very safe. But it was so natural, almost like a magnet. You could just see people being drawn to the building, being drawn to the music. And time and again, they’ve come to me and said how much it meant for them to have the music there.”

Now, the orchestra and museum are teaming up again, this time to provide chamber music indoors. Principal performers from the orchestra will be stationed inside, with their songs able to waft throughout the halls of the place itself, in a program called Music at the Museum.

“We’re bringing smaller groups to the museum to play chamber music of varying sizes,” Bernard said. “We had a wind quintet and a brass quintet, tubas, and we have plans for many more of those ensembles to come. And the audience is essentially those who are viewing the exhibits. It’s a beautiful synergy.”

The museum is open Tuesday to Sunday from 11 a.m. to 4:45 p.m.

Riley added that once the pandemic has passed, he has bigger plans for their collaboration, including open-air concerts on the museum’s lawns.

“I would only put the most wonderful quality of art on our walls, so too, I would only want to have a really, really brilliant orchestra on the property as well,” Riley said. “So in that regard, major

international art on the walls and a major sculpture on the grounds, and now the sound of a great orchestra. And this is only the beginning.”