

The Seattle Times



July 4, 2011

Departing Toby Saks: Chamber-music festival is 'rolling smoothly'

An interview with Toby Saks, founding director of the Seattle Chamber Music Society, who is passing the torch to James Ehnes. The SCMS Summer Festival gets under way July 5.

By Melinda Bargreen
Special to The Seattle Times

For the moment, all is quiet at Toby Saks' house, and the only sound is the gentle burble of the coffee maker as we grab some caffeine en route to an interview in the living room. But when it's festival time, the house is jumping day and night: Dozens of musicians stream in and out, practice their instruments in the guest rooms, rehearse chamber music together, gather around the dining-room table for meals, and whoop it up after yet another roof-raising concert down at Benaroya Hall.

It's noisy; it's hectic. But Saks, who founded the festival 30 years ago and is now celebrating her final season as its artistic director, truly loves the many sounds of her festival. That's why, when Saks' hand-picked successor, James Ehnes, takes over next year, there still will be lots of activity at the house Saks shares with her husband, the eminent gastroenterologist Dr. Martin Greene. She'll stay with the festival in an associate-director role, on hand for consultations and hosting and fundraising. And the house — where Ehnes usually stays when he's in town — will remain Command Central when it's festival time.

"I like round numbers," quips Saks. "I'll be 70 in January; this year is the festival's 30th season. I just felt it was the right time." (She will stay on at the University of Washington, where she is a cello professor and teaches music classes for non-majors.)

Meanwhile, Saks has programmed "lots of my favorite pieces" for this summer, the festival's second in the 540-seat Nordstrom Recital Hall at Benaroya Hall. It's a season that Ehnes describes as "a real blockbuster," containing iconic pieces like the Schumann Piano Quintet, Dvořák's "Dumky" Trio, Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" Quartet, Brahms' C Minor Piano Quartet and Beethoven's "Archduke" Trio, plus a pair of premieres. An all-star artist lineup will include not only Ehnes and some spectacularly gifted fellow fiddlers (such as Stefan Jackiw and Augustin Hadelich), but also pianists Jon Kimura Parker, Anton Nel and Craig Sheppard. Saks will join in as cellist, but less than in the past.

"I'm not performing much anymore," said Saks, who originally founded the festival as a performance outlet to keep her connected to her many musical friends from the New York area. "My priorities have changed."

A musical journey

Saks, a prizewinning prodigy as a cellist and a student of the legendary Leonard Rose, has much in common with the Seattle Symphony's Gerard Schwarz, a former trumpeter who has just concluded a landmark era in 26 years as the orchestra's music director. Coincidentally, Saks and Schwarz were in the New York Philharmonic at the same time; their acquaintance goes back to their teens and continues in the present (Saks taught Schwarz's son Julian, now a successful young cellist).

Saks moved to Seattle a few years ahead of Schwarz, in 1976, joining the University of Washington music faculty and performing in some memorable recitals and chamber-music concerts. She raised two remarkable children, both successful novelists with wildly varying addresses: daughter Claire Berlinski, who has worked in Britain, Thailand, Laos and France, and who now lives in Istanbul; and son Mischa Berlinski, who has lived in Thailand, France and Italy, now a resident of Haiti.

Saks fell in love with her adopted city, but she also missed performing with her New York friends, a fact that was a major impetus for founding a festival here.



At that time, Saks says, she was "in complete awe" at the idea of putting on a festival with no prior concert-presenting experience. Board members stepped in to help, and "everything really fell together when "the incredible Connie Cooper [the executive director] came aboard." With the board and the staff taking on the fiduciary and organizational issues, Saks says, "all I've had to do is create programs and hire artists."

She has hired some 266 artists over the years, introducing to Seattle a cornucopia of talent that otherwise would not have been heard. Saks hired the young and relatively unknown pianist Jon Kimura Parker and encouraged him to enter the 1984 Leeds International Pianoforte Competition, which he won — launching a major career. Parker will be back for this year's festival on July 25, 27 and 29.



The Canadian-born Ehnes first came to the festival at the age of 19 in 1995.

"Right from the start, it was clear to me that this man is special," Saks explains.

"He has genuine charisma; he's sweet, honest, direct, tactful and also a well-organized businessman. If I could think of one person who could take this festival forward at least another 30 years, this was the one. I told him he'd make an amazing artistic director and he said yes. From that point on, it was a piece of cake. The board approved him right away."

A new era

The passing of the festival torch from Saks to Ehnes could serve as a model for all such transitions. It's not always this graceful; festival founders sometimes don't want to relinquish those reins. But Saks began planning her exit four years ago in favor of Ehnes.

A Grammy Award winner, Ehnes is so busy touring with his solo career that he says, "I've actually spent more days at Toby's house than at mine [in Florida] in the past year. I think it's going to be great to have something to anchor me, so I'm not just a wanderer. Being the festival's artistic director will provide artistic and physical roots for me and for [Ehnes' wife,] Kate. I'm very excited about all the possibilities for this festival, which already is one of the absolute premier chamber-music festivals in the world."

Ehnes is already busy programming works and artists for the next few years, but he admits he's very glad that Saks will continue to have a role in the festival she founded. "There is no need to reinvent the wheel," he says, "when it is rolling so smoothly."

Both Ehnes and Saks point to their audiences as their *raison d'être*. As Ehnes says, "The atmosphere at the festival is one of total audience involvement — they trust that they're going to love the music. So we have the luxury of programming interesting things because the audience is so invested in what they are hearing. Toby and I don't program anything we're not passionate about — and fortunately our audience also feels a passion for the music. I feel incredibly lucky to step into this situation."

And Saks, too, is happy.

"Life is rich now," she reflects. "I'm ecstatic that the transition has gone so well. Now I can be like a good mother-in-law, who encourages — but who also steps back."

TIMELINE

Seattle Chamber Music Society
1982: Toby Saks founds the two-week Seattle Chamber Music Festival, which presents six sold-out concerts over two weeks at the Lakeside School.
1984: Festival expands to four weeks.
1987: Festival artists tour the former Soviet Union.
1996: Connie Cooper is appointed executive director.
1999: "Winter Interlude" (now Winter Festival) established at Benaroya Hall.
2001: Festival name is officially changed to "Seattle Chamber Music Society."
2005: Eastside festival is established at Overlake School.
2007: Commissioning Club presents first annual commissioned work.
2010: Summer Festival moves from Lakeside to Benaroya Hall.

FESTIVAL PREVIEW

Summer Festival of the Seattle Chamber Music Society

Opens Tuesday, July 5, with the first of 12 programs in the Nordstrom Recital Hall at Benaroya (7 p.m. preconcert recital; 8 p.m. main concert). Concerts continue Wednesday and Friday, and subsequent dates throughout July; \$10-\$45 (206-283-8808 or www.seattlechambermusic.org). For details of the Aug. 3-12 Eastside concerts, the Family Concerts, Emerging Artist program, preconcert dining, lectures, open rehearsals, live outdoor broadcasts, anniversary gala dinner and other enhancements, consult the website.