

The Other Newport Music Festival



When referring ambiguously to any music festival in Newport, most folks within Rhode Island's borders (myself included) think of the Newport Jazz Festival or the Newport Folk Festival. Both festivals have international recognition and sell out year after year. However, there is another Newport festival to be aware of, and it's unique in its own right. This festival, simply named the Newport Music Festival, takes place in July and is a month-long festival of classical music featuring a variety of ensembles and world class soloists.

The festival has an interesting history. In 1966, music impresario George Wein founded the Metropolitan Opera Festival at Newport. Wein is credited with founding both the Newport Jazz and Folk festivals. In its first and only season, this festival included full-scale opera production as well as chamber music concerts in multiple locations around Newport. Many of the chamber music concerts were performed in the historic mansions, thus resembling the salon concerts of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Though the first season was well-received, the festival itself was short-lived due to the prohibitive expense associated with producing opera concerts. After one season and a loss of almost half a million dollars (3 million in today's dollars), the Newport Metropolitan Opera Festival closed its doors. (As a side note, one may notice that there is virtually no opera to speak of in Rhode Island. Opera remains one of the most challenging musical art forms to produce at scale.)

But the story doesn't end there; in fact, it was just beginning. Following the first season, a number of Newport dwellers and music lovers banded together to save the festival's recital series in the Newport mansions, and in 1971 incorporated and formed the non-profit group Rhode Island Arts Foundation at Newport. From this effort, the Newport Music Festival was born and has flourished ever since.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Newport Music Festival. The festival is under new

management this year after the retirement of former executive director Mark Malkovich IV, who successfully ran the festival for the past 10 years. The new executive director, Pamela Pantos, comes to the Newport Music Festival following her tenure at Opera North in New Hampshire. Pantos, who is fluent in five languages, had a successful opera career and worked in business before entering the field of arts management.

From July 4 - 22, more than 40 concerts will take place in locations including The Breakers, Emmanuel Church, The Chinese Tea House, The Elms, The Bellevue House, Ochre Court, King Park and the Newport Art Museum. This year's musical offerings bring significant musical variety to the community, covering several centuries of music history. There is a good bit of standard repertoire by Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Schubert, Schumann, Tchaikovsky and Vivaldi. In addition, on July 7, opera legend Frederica von Stade performs with composer-in-residence Jake Heggie. On July 12, Van Clyburn International Piano Competition gold-medalist Yekwon Sunwoo makes his Rhode Island debut. Opera returns to Newport on July 18 in the form of an all Rossini program. Concerts on July 12 and 20 pay homage to American composer Leonard Bernstein, in celebration of what would have been his 100th birthday, and a special event, the annual Gala on July 15, features world-renowned violinist Joshua Bell.

Excluding travel and parking, the hardest part about attending the Newport Music Festival will likely be choosing which world class performance to attend. After 50 years in the making, this festival promises to be a cultural event worth experiencing.

For more information on the Newport Music Festival, visit newportmusic.org