

# GENEROSITY

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ELIOT KHUNER

Ruth Kahn (center) performs at a Musica Marin concert. Kahn founded the nonprofit in 2014 to promote chamber music and support youth arts organizations.

## Musica Marin's intimate concerts shine spotlight on chamber music

By EMILY LAVIN

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Ruth Kahn has played the viola on some of the world's largest stages, including Carnegie Hall in New York City and the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in Los Angeles.

But the Tiburon resident's favorite stage is a much more intimate one.

Her passion is performing chamber music — classical music played by a small ensemble of instrumentalists and traditionally written to be performed not in a concert hall but in a palace chamber or a room of a home.

"And sometimes the smaller (the space) the better, and the closer (the audience) the better," Kahn says.

Kahn's love of chamber music is the guiding force behind Musica Marin, the Tiburon-based nonprofit Kahn founded in 2014. The organization aims to perform and support classical music in Marin County and throughout the Bay Area by bringing internationally renowned musicians to private homes for chamber-music concerts where the audience sits mere feet away from those performing.

The nonprofit, which is funded through concert ticket sales and private donations, also works to support youth arts organizations. By Kahn's estimate, Musica Marin to date has donated just under \$10,000 to organizations including the Juilliard Scholarship Fund, the San Francisco Boys Chorus and the Mill Valley Film Festival's education programs.

Musica Marin's four shows per year are designed to personalize the concert-going experience, Kahn says.

"This is the way composers meant their music to be heard, in small venues where the veil is lifted between the audience and the performer," she says.

### A life-long passion

Music was a staple in Kahn's house while she was growing up in Berkeley as the youngest of three children.

"My mom always had the opera on on Sundays, blasting the whole neighborhood away," Kahn recalls.

She picked up her first instrument at 5 years old. She wanted to play the oboe, but her mom, a cellist, gave Kahn the choice between the violin or the cello.

Kahn remembers considering what it would be like to lug the bulky cello with her on the mile or so walk to elementary school. "I said, 'I'll take the violin,'" she says.

She began playing in youth orchestras and at 15 started teaching music lessons to younger kids. The viola became her primary instrument during her time as a member of the Berkeley High School orchestra.

Even as a child, she says, she never questioned she would play music professionally.

"I used to say things like, 'All I need is me and my viola over my shoulder,'" Kahn says. "At a young age, I just kind of knew that's what I wanted. I didn't even know what kind of career it would end up being, but whatever it was, I'd be happy doing this."

She earned a full scholarship to the University of Southern California, where she played principal in the school's orchestra. However, after two years, New York City came calling. After connecting with a Juilliard professor at a music festival in Maine, Kahn auditioned for and was accepted into the prestigious performing-arts school.

She took to the East Coast immediately.

"I was just excited about being in New York, all the exposure to all the great musicians, concerts, colleagues, faculty, just

being at the school," she says.

Her time in New York helped bolster her love of chamber music. She and her fellow musicians would often perform a concert until 11 p.m., then head back to someone's home to play chamber music into the early morning, she says.

Those experiences helped her develop a sense of camaraderie with her peers.

"(Musicians) are made of the same cloth," she says. "It's just fun to be with each other and get to communicate in this way but also just have good conversation."

### Mix of experienced, new artists bring chamber music into homes

After graduating from Juilliard, Kahn spent 20 years playing with the New York City Ballet Orchestra. She also toured with the New England Symphonic and the New York Chamber ensembles, which took her to Morocco, Israel and Jordan, where the group performed for Jordan's royal families.

She's also been the artistic director of chamber music series in New York and New Jersey and has played with both the New York City and San Francisco opera orchestras, among other groups.

When she got the idea to start Musica Marin, she knew she wanted to not only celebrate chamber music but wanted to do it while involving many of the musicians she's played with throughout her career.

Musica Marin's first concert was held in May 2014 at a home in the Buena Vista Heights neighborhood of San Francisco. Kahn enlisted a violinist friend and a French-horn player who used to belong to one of the music groups she played with in New York. She also brought in a tenor and members of the San Francisco Boys Chorus to perform.

The show sold out and set the stage for future shows in private homes in Marin County, including in Tiburon and Belvedere, and in San Francisco, where attendees can enjoy music, wine and food prepared by Musica Marin's chef, Mark Furr. The shows have featured established artists from the San Francisco Symphony as well as New York Philharmonic principal violist Cynthia Phelps and renowned mezzo-soprano Diana Tash.

But Khan has also used Musica Marin's concerts to shine the spotlight on younger performers, including artists from Juilliard and the Merola Opera Program, the San Francisco Opera's training program. Musica Marin has named New York-based composer Clint Borzoni its first composer-in-residence, both commissioning new works from him and premiering his existing works.

### Intimate setting connects performers, audiences

Musica Marin strives to give people a different concert-going experience, Kahn says. Listening to classical music at a larger venue can sometime feel stiff and a bit anonymous, she says.

"It's a little bit like I've just checked it off my list rather than something that stays with you a long time," she says.

Kahn and her fellow musicians want audience members to feel a connection to the music they're playing.

"We always talk about the music, we talk about the instruments, where they come from, we talk about their relationships with each other," Kahn says.

Pairing that interaction with the close quarters of the performance gets rid of the traditional barriers that exist at many shows, says Erik Anderson, a North Dako-



JOCELYN KNIGHT / FOR THE ARK

Ruth Kahn addresses the audience before a Musica Marin concert at a home in Belvedere last October. Kahn founded the Tiburon-based nonprofit in 2014 to perform and support chamber music in Marin County and throughout the Bay Area.



JOCELYN KNIGHT / FOR THE ARK

Ruth Kahn (center) performs a piece by J.S. Bach during an October Musica Marin chamber music concert in a Belvedere home. The Tiburon-based nonprofit hosts about four intimate performances a year featuring renowned and up-and-coming classical musicians.

ta-based cellist who began performing at Musica Marin concerts after meeting Kahn at an Italian music festival.

"When you have the chance to sit 3 feet away from your audience, where they can actually see the wrinkles on your hand and see if you're sweating, and you can see them moving in their seats and the expression on their faces, it really breaks down the idea that there's an audience over here and a performer over there," Anderson says.

That creates an impactful experience, says Michael Colbruno, who has attended several of the concerts and collaborated with Musica Marin to commission works from Borzoni.

Colbruno likens Musica Marin's up-close shows to a "musical kiss."

"You're looking right into the eyes of the musician. It's just so different than looking at it from 30 rows back," Colbruno says. "Your body, it vibrates. This is what acoustic voice and acoustic music was meant to be — unamplified sound."

And when the show ends, Kahn points out, the performers don't disappear behind a curtain or exit through a stage door. They walk into the audience and mingle.

"They get to know us as human beings, not just as performers," she says.

Kahn is helping to foster a sense of kinship among those who attend and perform at the concerts, which in turn bolsters the local arts scene, Colbruno says. He notes he's seen people meet at Musica Marin concerts and form collaborations or begin projects together.

"You're bringing people who are from a broader community into a smaller space who have like interests, and it's something that they love and are passionate about," he says. "You create these new friendships, you create these new interactions."

Colbruno marveled at Kahn's ability to foster those connections, put together memorable concerts and support local programs focusing on youth and the arts, calling her a "one-woman machine."

"She's just a dreamer and a visionary and a risk-taker," he says.

Kahn hopes to continue to grow Musica Marin's reach. Plans are already in the works for a three-day European-style chamber music festival, to take place at various locations in Tiburon in fall 2018.

She also wants Musica Marin to continue to premiere the works of young composers and further its support of Bay Area youth arts organizations.

Musica Marin's future will likely include more concerts, expanding to perhaps include master classes and events in new locations, such as the East Bay, Kahn says. But no matter how much the organization expands, Musica Marin will remain true to the concert-going experience it has created, she says.

"We never want to lose that intimacy," Kahn says.

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