

Keeping classical cool: Oldest US arts group turns 200

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9 photos



BOSTON (AP) — Before Beyonce, there were the Beatles. Before the Beatles, there was Brahms. And before Brahms was even born, there was the Handel & Haydn Society.

America's oldest continuously operating arts organization — which introduced the nation to composers like Chopin and Strauss, the 19th century editions of Top 40 hitmakers like Jay-Z and Lady Gaga — turns 200 on Tuesday.

But the Boston-based society says its bicentennial isn't just about looking back — it's about figuring out how to make classical and Baroque music cool for the iTunes generation.

"We have to constantly reinvent ourselves," said artistic director Harry Christophers. "We can't sit on our laurels."

The laurels have piled up over the past two centuries, as visitors to the Boston Public Library will find when an interactive exhibition goes live Tuesday. Music fans will be able to use iPad stations to listen to a simulation of the society's first concert in 1815, and archive photographs, program books, newspaper clippings and other materials dating to the early 1800s will be on display.

When the Handel & Haydn Society was founded on March 24, 1815, it was cutting edge. The venerable society — older than the New York and Vienna Philharmonics, both of which debuted in 1842 — premiered many important works in the United States, including household names such as Handel's "Messiah."

Its goal was to enrich and influence American life and culture. Its musicians, playing period instruments, brought the Baroque music of Bach, Handel and Vivaldi and the classical works of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven to the masses. Its choruses performed at memorial services for Presidents John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Fast-forward two centuries, and it's fair to say that classical music has seen better times. Album sales, concert attendance and air time all have been in decline for decades. Audiences tend to be old and white.

Despite the challenges, don't play Verdi's "Requiem" for the genre just yet, said Marie-Helene Bernard, Handel & Haydn's executive director.

"America is changing, and we need to reach out and engage these different and diverse communities," said Bernard, who took over in 2007 and is leaving in June to become CEO of the St. Louis Symphony.

Bernard put the society on a solid financial footing. Its budget for the 2015 bicentennial year is \$5.2 million and its endowment is a little over \$10 million, with a goal of \$12 million. In 2003, it won a Grammy for its recording of John Tavener's "Lamentations and Praises."

Music education has become a major thrust for Handel & Haydn, which puts children's choirs onstage. It's also been working to diversify its audiences: Nearly one in three ticketholders is now aged 18 to 44, and the society is reaching out to minority communities.

A partnership with Boston's Chinatown Cultural Center has the society working with newly arrived immigrants.

"There won't be an audience in 20 years if we don't teach children how to enjoy a concert," Bernard said. "If we do it well, I have no concerns about getting people to listen to Baroque and classical music. If you want a kid to enjoy broccoli, you don't put cheese on top of it."

Christophers, the artistic director, isn't intimidated by today's vast and competing musical choices.

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