

Oneonta Concert Association



The former Oneonta High School auditorium on Academy Street was the site of the first Oneonta Community Concert Association concert in February 1929. (Courtesy of Huntington Memorial Library)

If you happened to be the 676th person seeking membership in a proposed musical association in Oneonta in early 1929, it became your unlucky number, as your name probably went on a waiting list. We know this organization today as the Oneonta Concert Association, offering our region's concertgoers world-class programs in chamber music, dance, jazz and orchestra at an affordable price.

Back in 1928, Mrs. Ethel Mills, herself a musician in Oneonta, had heard about a New York City group calling themselves Community Concerts Corp., a combination of nine of the best known managers, having all the stellar artists on their lists, and making them available to smaller cities across the eastern states.

Community Concerts came to Oneonta after Mrs. Mills had convinced members of the Oneonta Women's Club to sell memberships to help start a local organization, the Oneonta Community Concert Association. A public meeting was also held at

the Municipal Building, today's 242 Main St., Oneonta, as Mrs. Mills and Attorney Owen C. Becker told of the advantages of having a permanent organization with membership to support a few high quality concerts. Community Concerts Corp. later became known as Columbia Artists' Community Concerts.

The Oneonta Herald of Jan. 17, 1929 reported that while 500 memberships at \$5 each were being sought, the local support was so robust that once the 675th membership was sold, no more were made available. That number was based on the seating capacity of the Oneonta High School auditorium, their initial venue, which was then found on Academy Street. Memberships came not only from Oneonta, as individuals from Otego, Unadilla, Gilbertsville, Cooperstown, and Delhi became involved in the drive.

The first concert of that series took place on Wednesday, Feb. 13, featuring the Russian Symphonic Choir. With the director, nine men and eight women gave a complete symphonic arrangement of classical, sacred and Russian folk music without accompaniment of any sort, with "all the orchestral effects being achieved entirely by the voices," according to the Herald. A further description said "the men in long red coats and the women in gowns of vivid red and blue, with jeweled Russian tiaras on their hair and many strings of beads about their throats, formed a glowing picture, which wakened long and sincere applause from their Oneonta audience."

As audiences grew, concerts were moved to the Old Main auditorium of the State Normal School (today's SUNY Oneonta) or to Hartwick College. Since 1964, most concerts have been held in Oneonta High School's Belden Auditorium, SUNY Oneonta's Hunt College Union and Goodrich Theater, and at the First United Methodist Church.

Concerts continued even during World War II and, beginning in 1941, the Association presented symphony orchestras in its series, and some of the nation's finest appeared: the Indianapolis, Minneapolis, Buffalo Philharmonic, Washington National Symphonies, as well as the Boston Pops Orchestra under Arthur Fiedler. Starting in the mid-1970s the Concert Association began a gradual shift to include ballet and modern dance, jazz, and folk music. During that same time, the half-century alliance with Columbia Artists' Community Concerts ended, and Oneonta's organization changed its name to just "Oneonta Concert Association." It was felt that becoming independent would enable the Association to bring artists from any management agency, and would greatly expand the variety and quality of talent available. The change threw the group entirely on its own for financial resources, with no backup support. However, audiences continued to respond, both through season subscriptions and attendance at individual concerts.

Attendance numbers at concerts remain at well over 500. While the all-volunteer organization is engaged in many 21st century endeavors, such as strong partnerships with several area venues and sponsors, as well as an active website, the OCA mission remains the same as in the late 1920s, to provide world-class programs at an affordable price.

City Historian Mark Simonson compiled this history in 2002 with revisions in 2012. Visit his website at www.oneontahistorian.com