



Artist Presentation Society: A Personal Perspective  
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Since Irene and Stuart Chambers (treasurer of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*) founded The Artist Presentation Committee three-quarters of a century ago, it has provided The Town Hall of St. Louis for debuts of local young artists. Originally, this couple had hoped that other groups would implement this desire in their own communities around the country and that there might be a network to exchange talent. The idea never materialized: thus, our organization remains unique.

In the first season, 1946-1947, my beloved brother, the late concert pianist Malcolm Frager, was one of six audition winners. At the time, he was only twelve—the youngest winner in the organization’s history—and performed a solo recital in February 1948 just after his thirteenth birthday. Two hundred ten single tickets were sold. His program included a wide selection of compositions, but the only one I heard him later perform was Nocturne, Opus 15 in D Minor by John Field. Four years after his win here in St. Louis, he made his real New York debut in The Town Hall on West 43rd Street. He went on to win the Leventritt Competition in 1959 in New York and the Queen Elisabeth Competition in 1960 in Belgium.

In 1946, the Guarantee Fund received a total of \$625 to pay for the first concerts. My parents, Alfred and Florence Frager were two of the original eleven contributors. The committee divided the proceeds from season tickets equally among the participating artists. In addition, money from single tickets went to the individual artist. During the first three seasons, each performer received approximately \$250; subsequently, all future winners would get a minimum of \$150.

Soon thereafter the funding method changed: The Artist Presentation Committee decided to fix general membership dues at \$5 rather than solicit larger donations from only a few patrons. As a result, the major work of the Committee’s members became voting and financial support. Taxes were halved and profit increased since there was no longer an amusement tax on ticket sales or federal tax on membership.

In the archives, I discovered many interesting and historical items, including the April 9, 1948, perforated double postcards Mrs. Chambers had sent to individuals inquiring if they wanted to continue as members of the Committee. One postcard was for her message; the other postcard was for the reply. Both had official green penny stamps printed on them—one of George Washington and the other of Martha Washington.

Today women are referred to simply by their last name; in yesteryear identification was different. In the documents of The Artist Presentation Committee, I found my mother, Florence, for example, referred to as Mrs. Alfred M. Frager when she was the president. Recorded minutes collectively refer to single women as Misses, married women as Mesdames, and men as Messrs.

In 1955, The Artist Presentation Committee petitioned the Circuit Court of the City of St. Louis to become The Artist Presentation Society and also to change the names of its chief officers from Chairman and Vice-Chairman to President and Vice-President. I am not certain why or when the article "The" was deleted in front of our name, but for many years, we have been known as Artist Presentation Society (APS).

In 1961, after fourteen years at the helm, President Irene Chambers resigned. Thereafter, a number of prominent musicians, including Mabel Henderson, Edwin B. Warren, Robert L. Adams, Frances Gillett, Margaret Campbell, and Virginia Settle held the top position. Today our current president, Lauren Di Bisceglie, continues the high quality of leadership established by her predecessors.

Until 1951 when the upper age limit for applicants was set at 35, there had been none. Through the years, monetary awards have increased in incremental steps (from \$100 to \$200 to \$350 to \$500 to \$1000 to \$2000 to the present \$3000). The border radius for applicants has been extended from 150 miles to 250 miles to 300 miles. Recital programs were formerly held at the Wednesday Club on Sundays at 4 PM. Now the programs are held on various days at other times and in different venues. From 1997-2003, the archival programs included the number of tickets sold and the number of people attending each recital. From time to time, former APS winners have given benefit concerts; however, APS no longer hosts the annual end-of-year receptions I remember that featured a previous winner.

At times, the group has expanded its activities and outreach in order to attract support and garner more public attention for younger music students. For a while, our past winners were featured in Classic 99's At the Garden Live broadcasts. For several years, we joined with The Sheldon Concert Hall for Prelude Performances, a series of concerts showcasing the talents of outstanding young musicians between 15 and 25. From 2011-2015, we sponsored On Stage at Powell, a competition to highlight the talent of the members of the Saint Louis Symphony Youth Orchestra. Most recently, we have held a biennial competition for students at Community Music School, giving a cash award to two winners and presenting them in a joint recital. These additional activities have complemented our group's basic purpose, which has remained steadfast: to further the careers of talented young musicians who have professional ability and live or study in the area.

APS holds annual auditions for vocalists, pianists, and solo instrumentalists as well as chamber ensembles. It should be noted that the auditions for applicants (who have already given two full-length recitals) have never been competitions. Using an absolute (or professional) standard, the judges unanimously determine the number of winners to feature the following season. Essentially, the performer must be of professional caliber and show readiness for a musical career. The judges do not merely give awards to a certain number of applicants in any given year; rather, the goal of APS is that "requirements apply in all seasons to everybody." In 2021, the APS board decided it was time to change the name of this annual event from "audition" to "competition" so that the language is clearer for potential applicants. Although the marketing may now be different, the purpose and goals remain intact.

The public is invited to the auditions. Since 2019, Classic 107.3 has sponsored the Audience Choice Award of \$500, which is determined by votes of the attending audience.

Originally, the music critic of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reviewed the recitals, but for a number of years, the newspaper has discontinued this coverage.

I think Mr. and Mrs. Chambers would be thrilled that their idea has continued to flourish. To date, APS has presented 151 winners in all-expense paid recitals. There has been at least one winner every year since the inception of the organization except in 1979 when the judges gave no award.

A few winners have gone on to become world-renowned concert artists while others have joined major symphony orchestras—even in principal positions. Some winners have enjoyed distinguished careers as teacher-performers at colleges and universities throughout the country. Other winners have satisfying musical careers in St. Louis. Through the years, I have had the privilege of knowing many of the winners either personally or by reputation. In preparing this document for our diamond anniversary celebration, I contacted some of them.

**Dr. Marie Jureit-Beamish** appreciates APS's generosity and support for her family of musicians. She entered the competition in the spring of 1982 and as a winner remembers that this honor was one of the contributing factors along the path of her completing the demanding performance requirements for her doctorate. Two of her daughters, **Laura Garritson Parker** and **Lindsay Garritson**, were also winners. Certainly, one of the greatest opportunities in their developing careers was performing solo piano concerts sponsored by APS. In addition, APS helped launch the musical careers of some of Marie's outstanding music students, including flutist **Amanda Blaikie** now with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, flutist **Dr. Jonathan Borja** currently Associate Professor of Music at University of Wisconsin—La Crosse, and pianist **Timothy Dawn** who lives and teaches in Germany. No wonder Marie expresses utmost thanks to APS for the decades of continuing to represent the high mark of excellence for musicians in our community.

When **David Brunell** was young, his parents began taking him to many concerts featuring not only large ensembles (such as the St. Louis Symphony) but also recitals by individual performers (including those sponsored by APS). Hearing these highly-accomplished young artists inspired him to work all the harder in his own piano practicing. He told me that when he auditioned for APS, he was impressed that my mother was very involved in the organization and wanted to help others aspiring to achieve a concert career. The excellent reviews of David's winning recital were invaluable to him and became part of his publicity flyer. He said that his APS experience was also a great stepping-stone to his being selected as a United States Artistic Ambassador, touring six foreign countries, and in securing an artist faculty position at the University of Tennessee where he combines concertizing with teaching. David gives many thanks to APS!

With great pride, **Jacqueline Kaplan Silver**, a 1952 winner, fondly remembers APS as a warm, welcoming organization with an emphasis on performing excellence. It was such an honor for her to be one of the winners, and she has never forgotten the thrill of presenting her program. Just beforehand, she had broken the little finger on her left hand playing volleyball at school but was determined to go ahead with the recital. This included Chopin's very challenging Prelude in d minor that required that injured finger to play continually a supporting bass note *fortissimo*. She bandaged the finger, put it in a steel support, and went out on stage like a warrior—determined to play her recital. Indeed it went very well. Today her busy music schedule includes teaching full time, giving piano programs, and presenting lecture series about music. Jacqueline extends a bravo to APS and notes that throughout the years has continued to maintain its high standards and provide wonderful opportunities to young musicians.

**Shannon Kessler Dooley** shared that Artist Presentation Society came into her life at a crucial time at the beginning of her musical career. She said the biggest impact APS had on her was in preparing for both the competition itself and her winning recital the following year. Concentrating on these two events kept her singing. During the gap year she took between her undergraduate degree from Webster University and advanced study, she prepared for graduate school auditions and the APS competition at the same time. She feels it was critical to have these two things as her focus, and even though she was not immersed in music, the work helped her stay connected. After winning the competition, she attended New England Conservatory. During her first year there, she did not have many performing opportunities; nonetheless she credits APS because it helped keep her in the mindset of performing as she was working toward her musical goal of being a professional singer.

In her submission for this document, **Vera Parkin**, a 1984 winner, remarked that at the time of her recital, APS represented an amazing group of people who provided support, friendship, and mentorship. These many years later, she still finds its members have remained dedicated champions of aspiring artists in the early stages of their professional lives. She feels the unbelievable generosity of spirit of APS members enables them to work with their young performers to create concerts of warmth and conviction in beautiful St. Louis spaces. She knows of no other organization that promotes this cause so tirelessly and effectively. She has also had the joy of seeing several younger artists with whom she collaborated become winners. Vera served on the board for a number of years and will be forever grateful to APS for their role in her musical life. She concluded, "Bravi tutti, APS! I would never have made my way in music without you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart."

As a young musician studying in St. Louis, **Sasha Starcevich** was introduced to the Artist Presentation Society competition through his wonderful teacher, the late and great **Jane Allen** who, incidentally, won APS in 1958. As the 1990 winner, he knows he was given the precious and invaluable gift of presenting a formal debut recital. He said this opportunity, which was reviewed by the press, helped to propel him into a lifelong career of performing and teaching both here and abroad. He knows that although young musicians have countless competitions to prepare for in today's world, very few golden opportunities for a formal debut recital still remain. He urges us to cherish and foster the success of APS so that musicians will continue to have this special moment in their lives.

**Harry Weber**, a pupil of Irene Chambers, spoke with me last June shortly before his passing two months later. At 93, he explained that her bel canto method, which did not put a strain on his vocal cords, was the reason he was able to sing until just a year before. Yet, this didn't stop him demonstrating her way of instruction during our conversation!

Through the years, **Jay Willoughby** has continued his admiration for the generous founding members of this organization. He said the honor of receiving the APS award in 1958 was the first credible recognition of his potential as a classical vocal artist. Later, in the 1970s, he embarked on a career as an opera singer, performing with New York City Opera, Miami Opera, Seattle Opera and Opera Theatre of St. Louis. Other professional highlights include his New York City debut recital in Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center, a joint recital in the legendary Town Hall, being a soloist in Carnegie Hall with the St. Cecilia Chorus and Orchestra, and going on a concert tour in Asia with the Gregg Smith Singers.

**Congratulations to Artist Presentation Society as it celebrates its Diamond Jubilee!**