

Inspiring Music Students to Succeed for 50 Years

While preparing for Powers Music School's 50th Anniversary Piano Festival, staff and faculty find music just as relevant today as it was in 1964.

Says Helen Clapp Stevenson, current Executive and Artistic Director of Powers, "Over the past fifty years, the perseverance and dedication of hundreds of volunteers, talented teachers, and staff have grown Powers into the music school it is today. The founding principles, that all students are entitled to high quality musical instruction and that music is an essential element of our lives and belongs in the community, continue to guide the School today."

This guiding principle that music belongs to everyone inspired one group of music-lovers in 1964 to take action when music education was just taking shape in Belmont.

Bringing Music to Belmont

Powers Music School began with a celebration. In February of 1964, Babette Whipple called together a group of Belmont musicians and people interested in music to consider whether some activity might be offered under the aegis of the newly formed Belmont Community Center. Together with Paul Hansen of the Community Center, Mildred Freiberg, Minuetta Kessler, Sandra Rosenblum, Ellen Powers, Margaret Duesenberry, Fran Babcock, Lise Stein, Sandy Kendall, Mmes. Coran, Davis, McCreary and Mr. Nettleton and Mr. Mains of the Belmont Public Schools, the group explored the possibilities of offering various musical activities to supplement the instruction opportunities then available through private teachers and the public school instrumental program. The approach was an innovative one—the agenda for the first meeting included a "piano competition, children's instrumental group, adult concerts, jazz combos, and student composition"—and sought suggestions for various types of activities.

From this first meeting the first annual Belmont Piano Festival was born, sponsored by the Music Committee of the Belmont Community Center. World famous pianist Joseph Paratore was among the 91 participants. This tradition, now known as the Mildred Freiberg Piano Festival, brought piano students and teachers together to share their music with the community and celebrate their accomplishments. Soon after, the Music Committee began offering recorder classes, a Junior Orchestra, private lessons for more than 250 students, and the annual Stein Chamber Music Festival.

Sarah Freiberg, daughter of Mildred Freiberg and current Powers faculty member, recalls the school's humble beginnings. "My mother, who was a wonderful piano teacher, offered our basement as a place for lessons early on. I think I was one of the first students, taking recorder from Gisele Krause. Our basement was semi-finished, but one had to enter from the driveway through a Hobbit-sized door in the unfinished part of the basement. I do have vague memories of the very tall Gisela Krause scrunching down to get through that door - if that's not dedication, I don't know what is. I think that a good part of the reason that I champion historically informed performance comes from those

formative years when I was introduced to incredible music from the Renaissance and Baroque periods through Gisela and the Belmont Music School.”

The Belmont Music School was officially incorporated in 1974 and become a nonprofit the following year. The school was renamed Powers Music School in 1988 in honor of Ellen Huff Powers. Renovations of the school’s current campus on Concord Avenue began in 1990 and continued through 2004.

Music for All Ages

While improving the school’s campus, Powers began to hone in on its central mission of offering music to all ages with the addition of the popular group keyboard program Keys for Kids® in 1999. Early childhood classes at Powers have since played a crucial role in introducing children to the joy of music, teaching them important skills for both music study and growth, and preparing them for lessons and a lifetime of music appreciation. Music Pups®, Dalcroze Eurhythmics, Singing for Kids, and Suzuki programs now offer a wide range of opportunities for kids to learn basic musical skills and begin to focus on learning an instrument.

During the expansion of the early childhood department, festivals and competitions kept the spirit of the original Belmont Music School alive in the heart of the community. The lengthening of the annual Stein Chamber Music Festival in 2004 to include two concerts, the introduction of the Peter Elvins Vocal Competition in 2006 and the Ellen Huff Powers Young Artist Competition in 2009, and the renaming of the Belmont Piano Festival to the Mildred Freiberg Piano Festival in 2007 honored the founders and contributors of Powers’ history while continuing and improving on the great traditions of music that began in the 1960s.

Over the years, the excitement of festival and competition weekends has allowed private lesson students from Powers and neighboring communities to share their music with each other, families, and friends, and to promote a sense of accomplishment and pride after each semester or year of hard work. Young and old join together to be inspired, uplifted, and connected.

The Changing Role of Music

As Powers continued to change and grow, so too did the public’s view toward music and how it fits into the demands of everyday life. Involvement in sports, school activities, and other pursuits, combined with the increasing use of technology, have made finding time for studying and enjoying music more of a challenge for many in 2014 than it was in 1964. However, the benefits of music and the “well-rounded student” remain unchanged.

Director Helen Clapp Stevenson states that participating in an orchestra or chorus group not only teaches students about music, but it gives them confidence in their ability to create something together, which translates to school, work, and other activities. “They develop social skills, performance skills, teamwork, and dedication, just as they would in sports,” she says. “Our students are often balancing 3-5 different activities every week,

and music can make a positive contribution to all of them, whether the student wants to pursue music professionally or is just interested in casual learning.”

This belief in the benefits of music education led to the creation of multiple new group and ensemble programs in 2013, including the Massachusetts Youth Symphony Project (MYSP) Senior, Junior, and Preparatory String Orchestras, Saturday Music Immersion program, and expanded ensembles for kids and teens, as well as the Powers Festival Orchestra and Powers Harmony Chorale for adults. The new programs offer students of all ages and abilities a way to continue learning, enhance other activities they take part in, and promote success and dedication.

Looking to the Future

The celebration of Powers Music School’s 50th Anniversary has sparked many discussions for faculty, staff, and families of how music will continue to stay relevant for fifty more years.

“We are committed to providing the best in music education and remain flexible in adapting to the musical needs of our community to keep us relevant for the next fifty years,” says Stevenson.

Says Kelly Marshall, Director of Marketing and Communication, “We recognize that everyone experiences music in his or her own way, and we are exploring new avenues to bring our collective knowledge and experience as a school to anyone interested in music, whether that means incorporating technology, workshops, or simply doing a better job of showing the true value of music in our lives and how it has touched so many of our students. We want everyone to have access to music and the pure joy it brings.”

For area students and residents who have grown up in Belmont and nearby, Powers has been a constant and supportive presence. Says Sarah Freiberg, “In the fourth grade, I began my love affair with the cello, which has become my constant companion. Years later, when I returned to the area and Helen Clapp Stevenson asked me if I would consider teaching at the school, I immediately said yes. It's the least I could do to give back to the school that started me out on my career.”

In addition to the wealth of community festivals, competitions, musical story programs, faculty concerts, student performances, private lessons, and classes serving more than 1,000 individuals each year, a number of special 50th Anniversary projects and events during 2014 will help students and faculty relive historical moments, celebrate the present, and look forward to future plans. An anniversary almanac and the Powers website and social media pages will feature memories and timelines of past events throughout the 2014 calendar year. The MYSP Junior and Senior orchestras will perform on March 2nd and May 18th, a 50th Kickoff Concert will feature special guest pianist Randall Hodgkinson on March 29th in anticipation of the 50th Midred P. Freiberg Piano Festival in early April, and a fall event and workshop are in the planning stages. Details will be posted as they become available at www.powersmusic.org/50yearsofmusic. For those who wish to honor the contributions of a past or current faculty member, or support

the future programs of Powers Music School with a legacy gift, donations will be accepted through the 2014 calendar year. More information about donating can be found at www.powersmusic.org/donate.

From humble beginnings to long-standing traditions, Powers Music School continues to be relevant in the Greater Boston community and serve as an inspirational presence to music students of all ages and abilities.