

# THE PERPETUAL SYMPHONY

GREAT AUDIENCES MAKE A GREAT ORCHESTRA.  
WALTER AND JENNY SHIFRIN HELP MAKE THE ST. LOUIS SYMPHONY  
GREAT BOTH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF POWELL HALL.

BY STEFENE RUSSELL

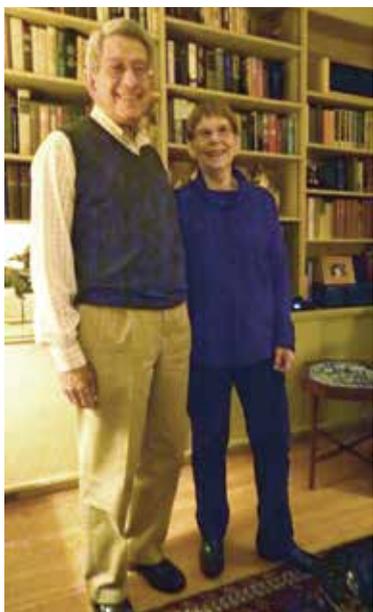


Walter and Jenny Shifrin

Jenny Shifrin says that she and her husband, Walter, are so keen to not miss David Robertson's pre-concert lectures that they are happy to gulp down a simple cup of soup just so they can be at Powell Hall early. "We used to go out to dinner before," she says. Now, "we go down to hear the lecture, because it helps you to understand the themes, why these pieces are in this particular program, and how they relate to each other." They buy two packages of season tickets, and always sit upstairs, so they can see everything happening onstage. They both say that Powell is one of the most welcoming places they know. "But maybe they just know our faces when we come in, because we're there so much," Walter says with some amusement.

The Shifrins are at Powell when the Symphony performs Brahms and Beethoven. They are there with their grandchildren for Family Concerts. But

## The Perpetual Symphony



The Shifrins are definitely both musical omnivores.

as much time as they spend at Powell, what marks them as true Symphony superfans is the time they don't spend there. They love the Symphony's Landmarks Series, for instance—chamber music performed in venues such as the Saint Louis Art Museum and the Old Courthouse. In fact, one of their most recent, vivid musical memories happened at the Jewel Box, as they watched horn players Thomas Jöstlein and Tod Bowermaster do dueling banjos several times better, playing dueling alphorns among the ferns and orchids. Wait, what?

“You know those Ricola ads?” Jenny asks. “OK, well, it's that. If you look on their package, there's a big long horn...it was really something to listen to.”

They also love the community concerts at the Piper Palm House in Tower Grove Park. Though finding a spot in that small but lovely space often involves some quick soup-gulping too. “Those are

hard to get into,” Walter says. “All of South St. Louis turns out, I think!”

Though both Walter and Jenny are equally passionate about classical music, their love of it was cultivated in different ways.

“My mother was quite a fine pianist, and majored in music,” Jenny says. “There was always a piano. I remember having lessons when I was about five. However, there was a portrait of her over the piano...and I really thought that every time I didn't do my scales, she knew it! So I switched to ballet.” When she took the train from Scarsdale into New York City for her lesson (at a studio next to Carnegie Hall), the trip always included a trip to the Russian Tea Room with her grandmother—and a stop to pick up sheet music for her mother.

“My father used to say that the instrument he played was the stereo, and he played it very well,” she laughs. But he was one of the founding members of the Mahler Society, and one of his closest friends was retired Metropolitan opera singer Alexander Kipnis; they'd listen to the Met broadcast together every Saturday. “They put their headphones on so it wouldn't bother the rest of the house, and turn it up really loud,” Jenny remembers. “But music was there all the time, classical music. I've just always had it in my life.”

Walter's parents were subscribers to the St. Louis Symphony, and they went to concerts often. (Walter now serves on the Symphony's Board of Trustees.) But his love of music was less childhood immersion and more a process of experimentation and self-education as a young adult. “I got more involved in music when I was in school at MIT,” he remembers. “I took a music course. Then I had

## The Perpetual Symphony

a part-time job in the music library, playing the homework.” He got turned on to the music of Leonard Bernstein (he even saw the composer lecture at MIT a few times), and developed a love for Sibelius, Shostakovich, and Saint-Saëns. But as far as favorites? “I don’t know,” Walter says, after pondering the question. “I suppose it depends on what I want to hear that day.”

The Shifrins are definitely both musical omnivores. Just as they get a kick out of unusual instruments and unconventional concert spaces, they don’t just stick to the classics, but have dedicated themselves to growing their knowledge of new music.

“I think the wonderful thing with David Robertson,” Jenny says, “and this was also true with Leonard Slatkin—they introduced a lot of new works. The first time you hear them, well, maybe it’s a bit of a stretch.” But keep listening, she says, and your ear evolves. Now, she says, they can pick out composers like John Adams when they are driving and a forward-thinking classical Sirius station gives a contemporary composer some play. She adds that their appreciation of new music has also grown through an independent listening club headed up by the Symphony’s choral director Amy Kaiser. “She puts on some of the new pieces, so we get to hear it broken down a little bit,” Jenny says. And by new, she means maybe new to

THOUGH BOTH WALTER AND JENNY SHIFRIN  
ARE EQUALLY PASSIONATE ABOUT CLASSICAL  
MUSIC, THEIR LOVE OF IT WAS CULTIVATED  
IN DIFFERENT WAYS.

them. “Like maybe a Charles Ives piece that frankly doesn’t get played that much, but if you understand what he’s doing, it helps a lot.” And sometimes, Kaiser plays a piece “that you think you know very well, and oh, my goodness, no I didn’t! She just did *Messiah*, and goodness knows I know that one,” Jenny laughs. “But she told us things about it, and had us listen in different ways.” She says this once-a-month experience has definitely led them to spend more time at concerts.

So has their friendships with Symphony musicians—one of the reasons they love sitting in the high seats at Powell and watching the action on stage is because they know so many of the personalities involved, including second violin Ling Ling Guan, Associate Concertmaster Heidi Harris and her husband, Principal Double Bass Erik Harris. (Walter first connected with Erik through a conversation about the Grateful Dead—the Shifrins’ son is also a big fan.) When the 442s, whose ranks include cellist Bjorn Ranheim and violinist Shawn Weil, first started out, the Shifrins were there for every concert. They also go out to hear English horn player Cally Banham’s side project, Cortango Orquesta, and don’t limit the friendships to musicians exclusively—they’re also very fond of the Symphony’s Vice President for External Affairs, Adam Crane.

“They’re multidimensional, they’re fun to know, and they’re great young people,” Jenny says. “Many of them come from out of town. And you feel that you want them to stay. So you want to be sure that you get to know them—and as you get to know them, they become friends.”

*Stefene Russell is Culture Editor for St. Louis Magazine.*