

MAKING SPIRITS BRIGHT

TWENTY YEARS OF THE COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM,
20 YEARS OF BRASS AT ST. AGNES HOME

BY JEANNETTE COOPERMAN



Gerry Pagano at St. Agnes Home

In addition to all of the significant anniversaries being celebrated by the St. Louis Symphony, the Community Partnership program is celebrating its 20th season. Bass trombonist Gerry Pagano has participated from the start, and his annual holiday concert at St. Agnes Home in Kirkwood captures the program's spirit—pure gift, no return expected.

Twenty years ago, Gerry Pagano was a young bass trombonist, and the symphony had just started its community outreach program. *Go, play music for someone!* the program director said. And Pagano, driving down Manchester Road, glanced up and saw St. Agnes Home.

Making Spirits Bright



Jonathan Reycraft and Pagano perform for St. Agnes Home audience.

People who lived there couldn't easily manage a trip to Powell Hall, he thought. Once they'd probably traveled 50 or 100 miles in a day; now they stayed within the same four walls. Live music, fresh and unpredictable, could interrupt their routine. They'd feel it vibrating deep in their bones, deep enough to cancel the ache of creaky joints for an hour or so. Its harmonies might lift their hearts.

That December, Pagano inveigled three other brass musicians to perform at St. Agnes. It wasn't their usual venue: no red velvet or gilded ivory molding. A linoleum floor, a low ceiling, and acoustics they preferred not to think about. But *faces*—close enough to see the involuntary smiles, the misted bifocals. Afterward, people asked eager questions of the musicians. How did they get started? Did they have kids? What were their plans for Christmas?

Pagano went home with *his* heart soaring. He'd seen people in wheelchairs, ill past caring about much of anything, light up at the sound of the carols. Sisters and aides had tiptoed into the commons room and stood in the back, listening.

He played at St. Agnes the next year, and the next. The symphony's community partnership program snowballed. "Who wouldn't want some musician from the symphony to come and play for them?" Pagano says. Overwhelmed by requests, the director asked Pagano to move to a different venue.

He obliged. But he kept going to St. Agnes, too, because he couldn't bear to stop. One year he bought a brass quintet, and they managed an air from Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*. The next year they were back to a trombone quartet and their familiar holiday songs. By October, the residents were asking: "Are the symphony people coming back?"

Maureen Byrne, current Director of Community Programs, saw the relationship Pagano had built at St. Agnes and brought his December concert

Making Spirits Bright

back into the formal program. He was thrilled. “It’s not going to do that much good for the Symphony,” he says. “These people aren’t buying tickets. This is truly a community service.”

A Santa hat sitting crooked on his head, Pagano opts for lively, fun, singable carols. “There’s a lot of beautiful sacred music at that time, but ‘Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer’ just makes people feel good,” he says. It’s also singable, and St. Agnes’s residents love to sing.

The musicians take requests. One year a woman called out “*Stille Nacht*” in a perfect German accent—maybe she’d emigrated, or held tightly to her German ancestry. They played “Silent Night” for her. “*Stille Nacht*,” she called again. “She wanted to hear it again and again,” Pagano says. “It touched a nerve for her.

“It’s very interesting to play for people in that situation,” he adds, “because it draws memories that are 60 or 70 years old. One man came up and told us he used to sing in the Symphony Chorus. The next year, when we came back,

BY OCTOBER, THE RESIDENTS WERE ASKING: “ARE THE SYMPHONY PEOPLE COMING BACK?”

he’d found an old program from one of the concerts he sang. I hadn’t even been born yet. But he wanted to show us. He probably dug out that program the day after we left and held onto it for the next 12 months, waiting to show us.”

Holiday music’s especially evocative, Pagano says, because it goes all the way back to childhood. “I remember going shopping with my mom and hearing Christmas music at the stores. We have heard these same songs every year since. The music’s deeply embedded. And music is such a big part of our celebration of Christmas—brass music especially.”

One year they finished, packed their instruments back into their lined cases and started to slide their arms into their heavy coats. Their audience lingered, sipping rare glasses of champagne in honor of the special occasion. The sisters came up and gave each of the musicians a tin of fresh-baked goodies.

It might as well have been frankincense.

“When you play onstage at Powell Hall—it’s not like I don’t appreciate all the applause we get,” Pagano says. “But you touch people a lot differently, and you get a whole different sense of it, when you go into a smaller venue. People appreciate it so. They come up to you afterward and want to tell you a story, some connection they have to the music.”

Jeannette Cooperman is Staff Writer for St. Louis magazine.