



New Beginnings for the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

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For the first time in its 22-year history, the [Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival](#) (June 13 - 28) welcomes a new Artistic Director. Paul Watkins, a cellist, pianist and conductor who hails from Great Britain, is putting a personal spin on his first year directing the Michigan festival with the theme *New Beginnings: Making Music in America*.



“I really wanted to tell a story about me and about my new love affair with America. I’ve been welcomed by so many wonderful organizations and American classical music performers and promoters, so I really wanted to have an American theme running through the festival,” Watkins describes.

Watkins’ arrival in Michigan seems predestined, as his wife, with whom he now lives in New York, is a Detroit native. He is also a longstanding friend of James Tocco, the Festival’s founding Artistic Director, who retired last year.

The Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival’s mission remains to blend classical music between cultural and religious venues. A secular event, the three main Festival sponsors—where a majority of the performances occur—are at [Kirk in the Hills Presbyterian Church](#), [St. Hugo of the Hills Catholic Church](#) and [Temple Beth El](#).

For his first year here, Watkins says that, “What I’m hoping in this year is to really get to know all of the venues.” In addition to the religious institutions, he notes the [Detroit Institute of Arts](#) and Ladder Company 12 as two wonderful venues for performances this year.

Additionally, Watkins knows that diversifying the types of places where the Chamber Music Festival plays will aide in widening the Festival’s audience, which typically skews towards older generations.

“We have a great audience already, which is typical of classical music audiences around the world. Part of the mission and wish is to really renew the audience and to bring in



younger audiences. It's a worthwhile challenge. I saw that last year at an opening event at an art gallery, there was certainly a younger audience there. The more we can get out to unusual venues, and be a part of the rebirth of Detroit, we can entice a few younger people to listen to all of this fantastic music."

The music, of course, stands for itself. Watkins' own [Emerson String Quartet](#), which he joined in 2013, opens the Festival. As they're the reason Watkins cites for living in America, it is only fitting that the Festival begins with them.

The event Watkins is perhaps most excited about is the closing night's festivities on June 27th at the Seligman Performing Arts Center. A collaboration between [Sleeping Giant](#), a collective of six young American composers based in Brooklyn, and the contemporary music sextet [eighth blackbird](#), presents the world premiere of *Hand Eye*, inspired by Maxine and Stuart Frankel's renowned modern art collection. Watkins believes it is "quite unlike anything the festival has done before," and which he "hopes is really going to attract a broad audience."

Watkins makes sure to point out that there will be "familiar faces throughout the festival," as the Detroit Chamber Winds & Strings features members of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and Michigan Opera Theatre.

The other important partnership the Great Lakes Music Festival prides itself on is with the [Shouse Institute](#). "This is an institute that through a generous donation brings the best emerging chamber musicians to the Festival for two weeks," says Watkins. The "top-class young instrumentalists" receive intensive coaching, as well as playing prelude concerts throughout the festival for concert-goers to enjoy.

Watkins' enthusiasm about both the next and current generation of musicians playing at this year's Festival is palpable, as his is overall excitement about the array of musicians he has been able to bring to Michigan. "I just want to play with as many of my friends as possible. I really get to choose the people I want to work with, and I want to play with as many of them as possible."

For a full list of performances at the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, click [here](#).

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