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The Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival celebrates its 20th year

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By [Mark Stryker](#) Detroit Free Press Music Critic



James Tocco is artistic director of the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, which begins its 20th season in metro Detroit on Saturday. / Eric Seals/Detroit Free Press



James Tocco, 69 of Cincinnati, Ohio practices on Wednesday, May 22, 2013 at the house he was staying at in Franklin, Michigan shortly before he was to perform at a benefit for the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival. The festival which turns 20 years old this year has gone from a small time event to one of the major events in Metro Detroit that has gained a big following. Eric Seals/Detroit Free Press / Detroit Free Press

The Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival began modestly in June 1994 with six concerts, a shoestring [budget](#) of \$34,000 and seven artists. The 20th festival, which runs Saturday through June 23, will feature 21 concerts, 30 artists, composers and ensembles, and a budget of about \$500,000.

That's a serious growth spurt, even [accounting](#) for a blowing-out-all-the-stops lineup to celebrate its 20th festival.

Under the artistic direction of Detroit-born pianist James Tocco, the festival has become not only a signature classical music event for metro Detroit, but one whose menu of artists and creative programming compares favorably with top-tier chamber music festivals around the country.

The 2013 festival will feature pianists Jonathan Biss, Jeremy Denk and Frederic Chiu and violinist Ani Kavafian, as well as five stand-out ensembles — Eighth Blackbird, Pacifica Quartet, Jupiter String Quartet, Parker Quartet and Claremont Trio — who were once part of the festival's training program. Each group will perform a work written expressly for it and commissioned in some way by the festival.

Tocco, 69, spoke last week about the festival's origins, programming and commitment to new music. The event grew out of conversations with his brother, the Rev. Msgr. Anthony Tocco, pastor of St. Hugo of the Hills in Bloomfield Hills. The Detroit Chamber Winds and Strings, led by executive director Maury Okun, came aboard as producer and Temple Beth El was a founding sponsor. In 1997, Kirk in the Hills church joined the sponsorship.

QUESTION: When you created the festival, did you think we'd be here talking about it 20 years later?

ANSWER: I did, yes. I was optimistic. We weren't sure what form the festival would ultimately take. It just evolved into what it is, which is a very intense two weeks of activities.

Q: Detroit has well-known pop music and jazz traditions, but the festival reminds people that the city has produced a lot of important classical musicians too — the late pianist Ruth Laredo, violinists Ani and Ida Kavafian, violist Kim Kashkashian, violinist Joe Silverstein, etc.

A: Absolutely. From the second year on, one of the pillars of the festival artistically was Ruth Laredo. We used to talk at length about what it meant to be from Detroit at the time we were growing up and becoming musicians. It was very fertile ground for classical music.

Q: What is your programming philosophy?

A: I don't like to remove people too far from their comfort zone, but at the same time I like to have them feel that they're being challenged. The important thing for me as an artist is that every year I want to discover something new.

We have an incredible number of pieces by living composers this year — 14 — and we have three composers who are no longer living but are enough in the recent past to be considered contemporary. The music runs the gamut from really **cutting edge** to very accessible. Along with this, I do give our audience Brahms, Beethoven, Mozart, Dvorak, Gershwin and so forth. I've always tried to have every program in the festival be interesting on its own merits.

Q: Why is it so important for the festival to play as much contemporary music as you do and to feature annual composer residencies with such leading figures as William Bolcom, John Corigliano, Joan Tower and others?

A: Music has to be alive. We can't just be a museum. Music evolves, and even our way of performing old music is very much impacted by the music that's produced in our own time. I don't compartmentalize music of the past, music of the present and music of the future. It's one continuum.

Q: You had a significant career as a pianist and teacher. Where does the Great Lakes festival fit into the scheme of your accomplishments?

A: Right at the very top. It is a legacy, something I feel will endure. I'm very proud of my role in establishing that.

Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

Saturday through June 23

Concerts in Bloomfield Hills, Beverly Hills, Detroit, Grosse Pointe, Brighton, Ann Arbor, Windsor

248-559-2097

www.greatlakeschambermusic.org

Subscriptions, \$90-\$170; single tickets, \$35-\$45; ages 25 and younger, \$10.