

# Music Room

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Jan and Jean Narveson in the Music Room, a small concert hall that is part of their Waterloo home.

PHOTO BY MATHEW McCARTHY



**ABOVE:** Jan Narveson addresses the audience in June prior to a concert by The AYR Trio.



**RIGHT:** Members of The AYR Trio, from the left, Yehonatan Berick, Angela Park and Rachel Mercer, perform in June at the Music Room.

World's best classical musicians perform in Jan Narveson's Music Room . . . but for how much longer remains to be heard

BY TERRY PENDER  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID BEBEE

**J**an Narveson climbs the narrow stairs in his Victorian-era home to the Music Room, a unique and lively corner of this region's music scene that is known around the globe.

Narveson is the founder and energy behind the Kitchener-Waterloo Chamber Music Society.

On the way up the stairs, the lanky philosopher passes a framed picture of himself receiving the Order of Canada from then-Governor General Adrienne Clarkson. He received Canada's highest civilian award in 2003 for his work with the Chamber Music Society and the books he's published on philosophy.

Recently the 82-year-old ardent lover of classical music, who is also professor emeritus from the University of Waterloo's philosophy department, has wondered how much longer he will be mounting the stairs before a concert.

Narveson is losing his hearing. "It is very, very terrible," he says. "I am going to start writing to top medical people to see if anyone can do anything about this condition."

The hearing loss he is suffering can make beautiful music sound worse than fingernails on chalkboards.

"The worst of it is pitch insecurity, you don't hear music at the pitch it is being played," says Narveson.

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*“We are much better known to artists around the world than we are to our local population, really much better. There are very few practising chamber music artists anywhere who haven’t played here.”*

JAN NARVESON

“Things pretty well sound godawful. So it has got to the point where frequently I cannot hear my own concerts.”

A couple of stats underline the depth of that loss: the society was founded 44 years ago; since then Narveson has organized about 2,000 shows featuring some of the most famous classical musicians in the world, including violinist Joshua Bell, cellist Matt Haimovitz and pianist Anton Kuerti.

“We are much better known to artists around the world than we are to our local population, really much better,” says Narveson. “There are very few practising chamber music artists anywhere who haven’t played here.”

“Here” is the red-brick house he shares with his longtime partner, Jean, at 57 Young St. in Waterloo. A tangle of grass, shrubs, flowers, weeds and untrimmed trees obscures the front of the home, directly across from Waterloo Park. Instead of a garden gnome, there is a small box made of wood with a glass door. That’s where the Narvesons hang concert posters.

It is the only clue that inside the foliage-obscured house is a storied concert venue for some of the most beautiful and challenging classical music ever composed.

As classical guitarist Rémi Boucher noted at the beginning of a concert: “This place is unique in the world.”

The Music Room holds up to 85 people, and those sitting in the front row will feel the vibrations from a cello made by the legendary Italian luthier Antonio Stradivari, hear the musicians breathing and see bow

strings breaking during a furious passage in a Beethoven quartet.

Very few classical music fans experience this outside of exclusive, private gatherings. If you do not believe that, try to buy a ticket for a show in this venue that features Bell or Haimovitz or Kuerti. Good luck.

Haimovitz, 47, is among the world’s most acclaimed cello players, and he loves the Music Room. At age 13, he made his international debut with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra as well as playing for the first time at Carnegie Hall in New York City. By 17 he was recording for the Deutsche Grammophon record label with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

Haimovitz teaches at McGill University’s Schulich School of Music, and is back in New York City regularly where his record label, Oxingale Records, is based. This fall the acclaimed cellist joins The New School, a private university in Manhattan, as artist-in-residence as well.

He’s played the Music Room at least three times with his 1710 cello that was made in Venice by Matteo Goffriller.

“I know that my colleagues at McGill talked about the Music Room,” Haimovitz said in a phone interview. “They just knew what I was up to, and they said: ‘You should contact Jan.’ This was 17 or 18 years ago when I started to play these kinds of venue.”

In 2000, he took Bach’s Cello Suites on a North American tour of restaurants, night-clubs, bars, bookstores and cafes. In 2003, he toured America playing contemporary music, including his own arrangement of

Jimi Hendrix’s “Star Spangled Banner” at the famous punk rock club CBGB in New York City.

Even with that diverse performance background the Music Room stands out.

“Some of this music is meant to be experienced in that way, and nothing can beat it,” says Haimovitz. “You are basically tearing down any artificial separation between you and whoever is listening. So it is a true communal experience that you have, and it is mostly meant for that kind of music.”

Classical music was originally performed in small venues, and Haimovitz says it is the most rewarding way to experience the music.

Narveson founded the Kitchener-Waterloo Chamber Music Society in 1974. For the first six years concerts were held in churches in Kitchener and Waterloo and in halls on the University of Waterloo campus. Since March 1980 the concerts, numbering 60 to 80 a year, have been held in the Music Room on the second floor at the back of the Narvesons’ home. The first concert there was a solo show by cellist Ofra Harnoy.

A large, sensitive microphone sits on a tippy stand below the Music Room’s cathedral ceiling. Many concerts are recorded and the CDs are sold to raise funds.

The Chamber Music Society is a registered charity completely funded by ticket sales and donations. In 1996, Narveson says he stopped applying for grants from the Ontario Arts Council, calling it too much trouble for too little money.

In the corner of the Music Room is a beautiful Steinway piano. It was paid for with fundraising concerts where chamber music artists waived their fees. Narveson tapped into his network of contacts and found a restored Steinway in New York. It dominates the room and helps attract top musicians to the venue.

“That’s one of the worst things about this

ear thing, the piano has gotten the worst treatment,” says Narveson. “Every instrument sounds better to me than a piano right now. Very sad.”

The Music Room’s back wall is covered with vinyl records. Other shelves are packed with CDs and books about music.

Classical musicians considered among the best play here because there are so few venues anywhere dedicated to chamber music. Every note counts in the small ensembles.

“Musicians in orchestras everywhere love to play chamber music,” says Narveson. “You don’t have to offer them much of an inducement to play for you.”

The Music Room was the first stop for the highly acclaimed Eden Stell Guitar Duo out of the United Kingdom when the pair first toured North America. Two days later the duo played Carnegie Hall in New York City.

“I get deluged with proposals to play concerts here,” says Narveson. “The season kind of falls into place by itself, pretty much.”

Bach’s “Goldberg Variations” are revered in the world of classical music. Bach wrote the music for keyboards. Russian violinist, arranger and conductor Dmitry Sitkovetsky arranged the music for string trio. Sitkovetsky’s arrangement is now a standard for string trios, and the Music Room was among the first places the music was performed.

In September 2007, three of the world’s best classical musicians – Jonathan Crow on violin, Douglas McNabney on viola and Haimovitz on cello – were preparing for the Canadian premiere of this music at Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto.

Before the big show, they wanted to play the arrangements in front of a live, appreciative audience in a small venue. Their manager called Narveson.

“That was completely heavenly,” says Narveson. “Yeah, that was great.”

The decades of volunteering have come with many rewards for Narveson – enjoying



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the live concerts in his home, becoming friends with many musicians and seeing between 3,000 and 4,000 people attend concerts every year.

“The pleasure of listening to music is No. 1,” says Narveson. “There is nothing like it.”

Narveson’s love affair with classical music started when he first heard Beethoven’s Quartets while growing up in Moorhead, Minnesota. After a Grade 8 math teacher banned a disruptive Narveson from class, he spent that time in the school library listening to classical music.

By the time he graduated from Harvard with a PhD in philosophy and began teaching at the University of Waterloo, Narveson had an extensive collection of classical music on vinyl.

But these days, when Narveson takes a

seat after introducing the musicians, the experience can make him wince.

Narveson first noticed something was wrong about four years ago during a performance by the New Orford String Quartet. The music sounded terrible. His hearing improved, only to deteriorate again. This past winter his ears went down, as Narveson says, and did not come back.

“So most of the concerts during the past winter have been pretty cacophonous for me,” he says.

“So that’s very serious and I don’t know how long I will be able to go on,” says Narveson. “For the time being I am just going on. It is a service to the musical community, and for that reason alone I am ready to keep at it, but after a while I think it may just get to be too difficult.”

As a registered charity there is a board of directors, but there is no plan in place

to ensure it will continue if Narveson has to step down. He has someone in mind to take over, but Narveson has only started working on a succession plan.

“The Music Room is another question,” says Narveson. “It is in our house. I don’t know how much Jean is going to want to do if I am not doing it. So there is that problem too.”

His long-time partner, Jean, is the founding editor of The Music Times, which covers the classical music scene in Waterloo Region and Wellington County. Jean was inspired by the monthly newsletter and schedule published by the Princess Cinema in Waterloo. She is a native of Brooklyn, New York, and came to the University of Waterloo to attend graduate school.

Music is a big part of the lives of their adult children, too. Son Jascha lives in Brooklyn, and composes new music.

Daughter Julia is an artist and musician who plays with the Ever-Lovin’ Jug Band. The soundtrack of their childhoods was the live, classical music coming from the room at the top of the stairs above the kitchen.

“There are many photos of me as a child playing with or staring at microphones and reel-to-reel tape recorders, which arguably helped spur my interest in music technology,” Jascha writes.

“Meeting new musicians from week to week, some of whom became family friends, left me with the sense that music was as basic and elemental as air.”

Haimovitz is not surprised anyone growing up in that house would seriously pursue music as adults.

“It is basically just a need to make music part of the fabric of our daily life, and that is what Jan did for so many years, decades,” says Haimovitz. “He is a perfect example of

Some of the posters decorating a wall at the Music Room

someone who is just incredibly passionate and needed to live that soul, and basically created a way that he could breathe culture around him and that’s what he did.”

There is always a special concert followed by a potluck dinner and celebration every Dec. 16. That is Beethoven’s birthday. And that motivates Narveson to continue as his hearing deteriorates, turning beautiful music into painful noise.

The Music Room and the Chamber Music

Society will continue at least until Dec. 16, 2020. That date marks 250 years since Beethoven’s birth. During the year leading up to it, the Penderecki String Quartet will perform all of Beethoven’s 16 Quartets.

“And I expect that will be a major highlight of our whole year, our whole career,” Narveson says. ©



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