
DONOR PROFILE:

Dr. Sam Steppel

Dr. Sam Steppel was born in Uzbekistan, raised in Canada and earned a Ph.D. in physics from the University of Maryland. At Maryland, he met his wife, Barbara, an undergraduate in the UM Department of Fine Arts and an amateur cellist, who was not only the love of his life but his inspiration throughout their life together to learn more about art and music. After Barbara died in June 2006, Sam decided to honor her love of music by supporting the April 2007 performance of the Australian Chamber Orchestra at the Center and hosting a pre-performance reception in her memory for friends and family. Evelyn Elsing, Professor of Cello in the UM School of Music, and her student, Kacy Clopton, performed at the reception. Additionally, Sam has established the Barbara K. Steppel Memorial Faculty Fellowship in Cello, the first of its kind in the School of Music; Professor Evelyn Elsing is the first Fellow.

Sam recently talked with us about his wife, her love of music and art and their connection to the Center.

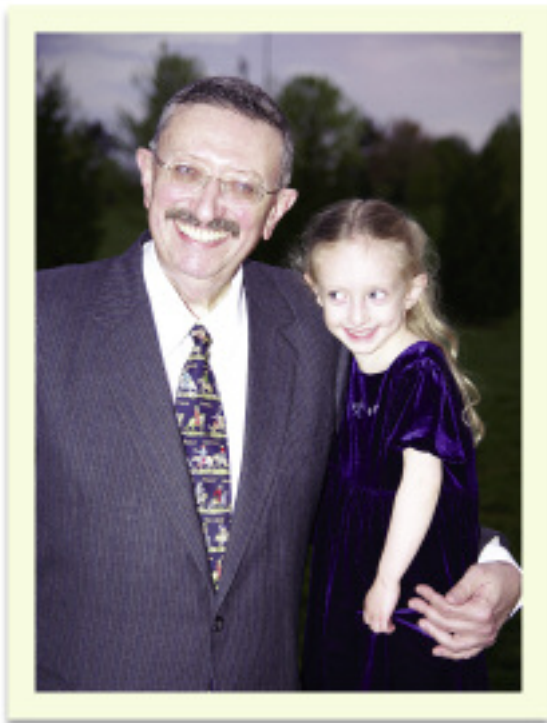
Q: Did you have an interest in music and the arts before you met your wife?

My parents were working-class people and I had no exposure whatsoever to classical music until high school, when I pretty much on my own decided to become acquainted with it.

A supermarket in my neighborhood was selling classical records for a dollar apiece, and I bought three of them and listened to them for about a year and eventually started liking the music.

When I got to college — in Canada, at McGill University — I started looking at visual art, which I hadn't particularly been exposed to either. I was in the honors physics curriculum at McGill, and aside from first-year English, I never had any courses outside of the sciences in the entire four years. Everything else I had to pick up on my own.

This background came into play on one of my first dates with Barbara. We met at the University of Maryland when she was a sophomore in the fine arts program and I was a first-year graduate student in physics, and I decided she was really special from the first date. On this occasion, we were driving in the car and she made some joke about Venus on the half-shell and I laughed. And she said "Do you know what I'm talking about?" and I said "Botticelli," and she was shocked. She hadn't met any students in the physics department, or outside the arts department in general, who were familiar



Dr. Sam Steppel and granddaughter, Madeleine Rachael Steppel.
Photo: Ron Grendysz.

with Botticelli. I think she was a little impressed.

Q: Why is your gift meaningful to you as a way to honor your wife?

A few years ago Barbara wrote a story called "Toccatina in Heaven," about a dying man's deep desire, as he lay in his hospital bed, to hear Bach. It shows her attitude. She loved Bach; she loved music.

Ever since the Clarice Smith Center opened we started going there regularly. In all honesty, we

were a little envious of the students today because nothing like that existed when we were there — the quality and range of the programming is exceptional. Although we met at the university and got married in the small chapel on campus, we hadn't been active alumni for almost 20 years after that. We really became supporters in the '90s, and expanded our commitment after 2000. We liked the Center and its role in the university, and all of these things came together in our minds to form a real bond with the university that hadn't existed before.

When Barbara unfortunately passed away last year, I was trying to think of different ways to memorialize her, and the Australian Chamber Orchestra seemed like something she would really like to see. And the reception, with Evy and Kacy playing and everyone getting together and talking and remembering Barbara — this was something she would have truly enjoyed. The concert and reception was a one-time thing but I

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also wanted something more permanent so I decided to establish a faculty fellowship in Barbara's name.

Q: What was it like to go to the ACO concert, knowing that you had helped make it possible?

It was phenomenal; it was a fabulous concert. They were playing with such energy, such fire — the audience was absolutely rapt and wouldn't let them off stage without multiple encores. I hoped that part of that came from their knowledge that this was a special concert and that I had chosen them specifically as the performance to honor Barbara.

All my guests — the 30-40 people I had invited and gotten seats for — were totally wowed by the concert, even people who do not usually go to classical music performances. Then afterward, my family and I got a chance to meet with the ACO's artistic director, Richard Tognetti, and with guest cellist Pieter Wispelwey backstage. Barbara would have loved it.

Q: Has your relationship with the Center had an impact on your life?

My relationships with the university and the Center have been tremendously rewarding to me and tremendously valuable to me in the last year.

The School of Music and the Center have been extremely kind; they have invited me to do all kinds of things that I would otherwise not have had the opportunity to do. I sat in on a cello sectional class for the National Orchestral Institute just last week — there

were 11 really good cellists playing together in the same room, with just me. I have to also mention Bob Gibson, who has been extremely nice and generous with his time and comments. Everybody at the Center has just been wonderful.

I've also gotten the chance to get to know Evy, who is a delightful person. She recently invited me to a private concert she was giving with Santiago Rodriguez. It was superb; I took my four-year-old granddaughter. I've really enjoyed meeting some of the music students, particularly the cello students. It is a pleasure and privilege to meet these students and feel that somehow you're part of the process of helping them become great musicians. I love musicians. I don't really understand how they do what they do — it's so difficult, and yet they do it.

Since my relationship with the Center has deepened, one thing that has happened is that my two children have become transformed in their attitude toward the university. They never felt a particular connection before. Now they want to be involved in the endowment and make sure everything goes as planned.

I think it's great for the university to have this continuing commitment from people who've never been involved before. If two years ago I had said something to my kids about their children going to the University of Maryland, their response would have been lukewarm. But by chance, I raised that issue just last week with my son, and he said it's certainly something they would consider. It definitely pleased me. ■

Meet the Development Staff

Clarice Smith
Performing Arts
Center donors
make an
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support and
have the power
to transform
many lives,
including their
own. The Center
is pleased to
introduce its
Development
Department staff



Back row: Heidi Onkst, Claire Kuttler, Ed Lewis, Scott Eichinger, Alyona Ushe.
Front row: Winnie Kwok, Fallon Bachman, Katie Iacono. Photo by Mike Morgan.

who works with donors to make this possible.

Led by Heidi Onkst, the development staff devotes its energies to providing our donors with opportunities and activities to keep you connected to the life of the Center. We want to ensure that all of our donors, individuals and

organizations, experience the performing arts in deep and profound ways.

The Center's development team is here to assist you as you make plans to support the performing arts at Maryland and looks forward to getting to know you all as the

Center begins its seventh season.

It is with deep appreciation and gratitude that we thank you all for your enthusiastic support of the Center's mission: To transform lives through sustained engagement with the arts. ■

Heidi Onkst, Senior Director of Development

Ed Lewis, Associate Director of Development

Scott Eichinger, Manager of Individual Donor Relations

Alyona Ushe, Assistant Director of Institutional Giving

Fallon Bachman, Development Administrative Assistant

Katie Iacono, Graduate Assistant for Development

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