Britt Music Festival

When the Britt Music Festival opened in Jacksonville, Oregon, on August 11, 1963, it was the only outdoor summer music festival in the Northwest. Since then, the festival has grown from a two-week classical season to four months of jazz, pop, rock, bluegrass, folk, dance, and musical theatre. Today's classical orchestra is twice the size of the first chamber orchestra.

In the fall of 1961, Sam McKinney and John Trudeau, who both worked at Portland State College (now Portland State University), visited southern Oregon looking for a site for a summer festival. The estate of photographer Peter Britt was available, and they thought the weather in southern Oregon might provide the ideal setting. With its good acoustics and beautiful view, they judged the hillside to be the perfect venue. They also knew that Ashland's Oregon Shakespeare Festival was already drawing tourists to the area.

After meeting the mayor and making a presentation to Jacksonville's city council in 1962, Trudeau and McKinney formed a board of directors and hired Portland State faculty member and bassoonist Gordon Solie as personnel director. They then recruited the first orchestra for its 1963 debut.

In l964, one hundred valley residents gathered at the Jacksonville Museum to form the Britt Festival Society. Jackson County purchased the eleven-acre Britt property for $40,000 in 1971 and entered into a long-term agreement with the Britt Festival Association. Fourteen years after the opening concert, the temporary canvas and plywood stage, lit by forty-five 75-watt bulbs hanging in #10 tin cans, was replaced by a new pavilion. An Economic Development Administration grant of $304,000 together with $128,000 in private funds paid for the facility, which featured a sawtooth ceiling and hinged glazed panels.

In 1979, Steve Sachs and David Zaslow staged the Festival's first jazz concert to sold-out crowds. Over the years, the Britt Festival has presented such performers as Count Basie, Pinchas Zukerman, Jean-Pierre Rampal, Christopher Parkening, Diane Schuur, Mel Torme, Dave Brubeck, Garrison Keillor, Billy Idol, Michelle Shocked, and the Neville Brothers.

Trudeau believed that "live performance and music education go hand in hand." Since 1985, the Britt Institute has provided music education programs for music lovers of all ages and skills. The programs range from internships to intensive summer camps in strings and jazz, to pre-concert lectures. The Britt also provides a classical musical appreciation program for eighty-eight elementary schools in Jackson, Josephine, and Douglas counties.

During the 1987 silver jubilee season, John Trudeau retired as director and conductor. He was replaced by the conductor of the Oregon Symphony, James DePreist. In l993, Peter Bay became the third music director/conductor. The three conductors helped celebrate Britt's fortieth anniversary by directing a concert together in 2002.

Written by Maryann Mason

Further Reading:

Celebrate: Peter Britt Festivals Sivler Juliee Season. Britt Festival Program, June 24-September 1, 1987.

Trudeau, John. *Touches of Sweet Harmony: Britt Festivals, 1963-1987*. Medford, Ore.: Britt Festivals, 2006.

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