

THE HISTORY OF MUSIC AT OLLI/LRI

By Palmer McGrew, OLLI Historian

OLLI's predecessor, The Learning in Retirement Institute at GMU, or LRI, held its first classes in 1991. There were no music classes or events that year, but they began immediately thereafter.

Helene Layman presented a class on *Tosca* the next (winter 1992) term. Helene, an opera singer, had performed in *Tosca* herself. The next term a GMU music professor, Sam di Bonavantura, started teaching music classes at LRI, beginning with a course on listening to classical music. He was to continue teaching classes through 1997, covering all the major classical music periods. Indeed, during that period (1992 – 1997), Prof. di Bonavantura was, essentially, the LRI Music Department.

During that time there were many courses taught by other Mason professors and OLLI/LRI members, but none included performances by faculty or students. Three significant developments changed the nature of music classes at OLLI: Singing for Fun, Music Sampler, and The Recorder Consort.

Helene Layman initiated Singing for Fun, with Dolores Ecklund accompanying on piano, in 1997. There was no piano at Tallwood, so the classes were held off campus. Over the years, leadership of the Singing for Fun class has passed to Joyce DeVoll and then to Linda George and your humble historian. We now sing mostly popular music from our youths. Delores retired a couple of years ago and was replaced by Gayle Parsons, an amazing pianist who seems to be able to play anything given a couple of notes to start with. This group has so much fun it should be illegal. Or mandatory. ([Link](#): Past directors and pianist; [link](#): The Beat Goes On.)

In the spring of 1999 a Music Sampler course took place for the first time and continues to this day. The catalogs do not reveal who was responsible for that first course. The course initially relied heavily on Mason music faculty and the armed service bands, but also included interesting musicians from around the community – for example, a balalaika ensemble. Gradually the Mason Music Department, now the School of Music, provided more and more instruction until now, Mason does all of it. It is difficult to describe the Music Sampler experience since it changes from week to week, but whether it includes performances (and insights) from faculty or students or both, it is nearly always wonderful. Kathleen Meyer is now the coordinator, as she has been for a number of years. The

previous coordinator for many years was former OLLI member Margaret Andino; Margaret did a great job of arranging instructors/performers during this period when Mason was not doing all the coordination itself. To support Music Sampler, the Mason School of Music has placed a marvelous piano in TA-1, and it is much enjoyed by Singing for Fun, as well. ([Link](#): Adrianna at Music Sampler class.)

Norm Rosenberg started giving recorder classes in 2005. Starting with a few students with varying degrees of musical education, that effort has now grown to The Recorder Consort, an accomplished group that plays for us at meetings and parties as well as around the community. Jayne Hart has led the group for the past few years. The initiative shown by members—who hold extra practices to improve their playing—is a testament to their dedication and the joy that they get from playing. In fact, it is obvious to any listener that the consort members truly enjoy what they are doing. ([Link](#): About the recorder; [link](#): OLLI's Musical Ambassadors.)

There are classes on music at all OLLI campuses, including, notably, Gloria Sussman's regular course "The Ongoing Pleasures of Music." And ongoing it is, since 2000. ([Link](#): profile of Gloria.) Participatory classes are still only held at Tallwood. These classes, principally Singing for Fun and Recorder, bring much joy to the participants and listeners. Participants believe, and there is evidence suggesting that they are correct, that music is healthful and therapeutic.

The beauty of our OLLI program is that you don't have to own an expensive instrument and practice long hours on it to participate. Everyone is born with an instrument, his voice, and recorders are not expensive.

So whether you are content to let someone else produce the music or would like to participate yourself, there are plenty of classes for you, thanks to inspired and dedicated members, past and present.