St. Cecilia Music Center
ESTABLISHED 1883
BUILDING TOUR
MISSION STATEMENT

Since 1883, the mission of St. Cecilia Music Center has been to promote the appreciation, study, and performance of music in order to enrich the human spirit and enhance the quality of life for the residents of West Michigan.
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There were 63 charter members of the St. Cecilia Society in 1883; by 1895, the society boasted 785 dues-paying members.

In the earliest years, when performing for the public, members charged 75 cents for reserved seating and 50 cents for general admission.

By 1890, the society was sponsoring performances by world-renowned musicians at the Ladies Literary Club building, completed in 1887, on Sheldon Blvd. NE.
BUILDING HISTORY

Welcome to St. Cecilia Music Center and this historic building, which is one of the city's architectural treasures. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1971, it is the only building in the United States to have been built by women to be operated solely for the purpose of music.

The story begins in 1883 when nine Grand Rapids women decided to form a society dedicated to the appreciation, study and performance of music. They were all talented musicians in their own right and they named their group the St. Cecilia Society after the legendary patron saint of music.

In the late 1880s, after years of studying and performing in each other's parlors and then in a series of rental spaces, St. Cecilia members finally began planning for a building of their own. Prominent Chicago architect Henry Ives Cobb was hired to design the building. Construction began in 1893 and took about seven months to complete. Total cost, including furnishing, was $53,000, which was slightly more than twice the original estimate. The completed building was opened to the public on June 19, 1894, and about 4,000 citizens, nearly 10 percent of the city's population at the time, attended the dedication festivities.

In 1925, a major renovation project expanded auditorium seating and improved acoustical amenities. Other projects—including a $2.4 million renovation completed in 2016—have given rise to further improvements, ensuring that this landmark structure will be preserved for generations to come.

With the distinction of being “the mother of the arts” in Grand Rapids, SCMC's existence is integral to the story of many of the city's prominent arts organizations. The predecessor to the Grand Rapids Symphony was organized under St. Cecilia sponsorship in 1919. In the 1950s, the local Art Center held art classes in the building under the auspices of the GI Bill. The building was also home to the Grand Valley Artists group for a time. Opera Nights started in the 1960s, sowing the seed for the creation of the West Michigan Opera Association, which evolved into today's Opera Grand Rapids. Grand Rapids Civic Theatre also traces its beginnings to SCMC.

In addition to its commitment to the arts, SCMC has hosted thousands of community events since its founding, including an address by Susan B. Anthony in 1899 in support of women's suffrage. During World War I, SCMC served national needs by headquartering the Red Cross in the building. Slated for demolition in 1966 in the wake of downtown urban renewal, the building was saved by members of the community, who recognized its great value as a regional cultural asset.

The original name, St. Cecilia Society, was changed in 1970 to St. Cecilia Music Society and then in 2007 to St. Cecilia Music Center. Built by the early members of the St. Cecilia Society as a “dignified temple of music,” this living landmark has been true to that purpose ever since.
• St. Cecilia Music Center’s architect, Henry Ives Cobb, also designed the original University of Chicago. He was a protégé of acoustics expert Dankmar Adler, who designed Chicago’s Auditorium Theater and was a consultant on the design and construction of New York’s Carnegie Hall. Cobb applied Adler’s acoustical theories to the St. Cecilia auditorium.

• The cornerstone, laid in 1893, was filled with many period artifacts, including copies of all four Grand Rapids newspapers, a bouquet of yellow roses and a history of the organization to date.

• The script lettering of the words “St. Cecilia” on the face of the cornerstone was said to be a facsimile of the handwriting of Mrs. Frank M. Davis, one of the founders. It was used for many years as the society’s logo.

• The decorative tiles on the outside south wall façade are all that remains of the Metz Building on East Fulton, which did not survive urban renewal and was torn down in 1971 to make way for a parking lot.
Prominent Chicago architect Henry Ives Cobb designed an Italian Renaissance-style building that features a façade with three distinct parts—a sandstone base, a brick center section, and at the top a terra cotta frieze. If you look closely, you'll be able to spot musical references in the architectural details, including a horn, a cello, a triangle, musical pipes and cherubs with trumpets that herald the building's purpose.

The wrought iron lanterns flanking the entryway are original to the building. So are the leaded glass panels that surround the entry doors. In other areas of the building, you'll notice this same delicate pattern on the upper sections of the windows.

The three stained glass panels, two on the vestibule walls and one at the auditorium entrance, are also original. At one time they were part of a 16-panel skylight in the auditorium that was taken down in 1901 to address the problem of a leaky roof. You'll see eight other similar panels over the stairs leading to the ballroom.
FUN FACTS

- Men were admitted to membership in 1893, but only as associate members.

At first called the Reception Room, later the Studio, and still later the Presidents Room, this space is now known as the Wege Recital Hall in honor of Peter Wege, who bequeathed the organization $1 million—the largest single gift ever received—in 2014. All of the architectural details, including the fireplace and mantel, the leaded glass windows, the moldings and the pilasters with Corinthian capitals are original to the building. The fireplace is one of three in the building. They may have worked at one time, but they no longer function.

From the beginning, the room was a hub of activity. Members presented recitals here. They held teas, studied the lives of composers and delved into various aspects of music. There were two classes of members—active and honorary. Active members had to audition and meet other strict criteria and were expected to perform when asked. Honorary members paid dues so they could attend rehearsals and members-only performances. Today, there are no longer membership categories, and the programs of St. Cecilia Music Center are open to all.

The St. Cecilia Society was typical of other women's clubs of the time, like the Women's City Club and the Ladies Literary Club in Grand Rapids. These groups were established in an era of affluence that freed women from domestic responsibilities. This freedom allowed them to turn their talents and their energies to improving the cultural and educational lives of their communities.

As part of the women's club movement, other American cities also saw the establishment of St. Cecilia societies. This organization, as far as we know, is the only one that has survived to the present day.
FUN FACTS

- At one time, this room served as the staff office; today the offices are located on the lower level.

- One of the terra cotta cherubs that originally graced the façade is now displayed in a specially built cabinet.
This room was originally called the library because of the built-in storage for music that is hidden behind the paneling. Another hidden treasure, which is concealed behind the mirror over the fireplace, is a safe—which once housed important documents but is now quite empty.

Besides the leaded glass windows, this room features five paintings by the nationally known Grand Rapids artist Mathias Alten (1871-1938), four of which are landscapes. The fifth painting, the spectacular *Three Women in a Rowboat*, features three women who were family members of Ottokar Malek, conductor, from 1920 to 1923, of the Grand Rapids Civic Orchestra, which began at St. Cecilia and evolved into the Grand Rapids Symphony.

Over the years, to maintain its pristine condition, the building has undergone a number of remodeling, renovation and modernization projects, from adding kitchens to updating electrical systems to applying new paint and wallpaper. The interior décor that you see throughout the building today is the product of the major renovation that was completed in 2016.
• Violinist Itzhak Perlman inaugurated the Great Artist Gala in 1988 to celebrate the renovation that made the building barrier free. Ten years later, he returned as Great Artist to mark the completion of another major renovation.
The heart of the St. Cecilia building, Royce Auditorium has been named in honor of the Royce family, whose generosity and participation in St. Cecilia programs has spanned five generations. The auditorium is considered one of the finest recital halls in the country and widely acclaimed by performing artists and audiences for its superb acoustics. There are 630 main floor seats, including two rows with handicapped access. The chandeliers and the wall sconces were made by a local company and installed in 1925, during the first of several major building renovations. The new seating, also installed in 1925, was removed, refurbished and returned in 1984.

The auditorium was one of the focal points of the 1997 renovation. The emphasis was on acoustical adjustments, a rebuilt proscenium, movable walls to alter the depth of the stage, and new finishes that included a new plaster ceiling. In 2016, brand-new seats were installed and the auditorium was also calibrated with a top-of-the-line sound system.

Today, St. Cecilia Music Center presents dozens of world-renowned artists each year to sold-out crowds. The organization’s three top-flight concert series bring to the Royce Auditorium stage premier jazz musicians, in-demand folk artists and an impressive roster of classical music performers from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. The St. Cecilia Music Center building is also home to the School of Music, which serves over 1,000 eager minds each year through youth and adult ensembles, summer camps, music clubs, and Strings to Schools, a free, after-school, beginning string class in GRPS schools that culminates in a year-end student performance in Royce Auditorium.
FUN FACTS

- During World War I, the Red Cross had auxiliary quarters in the building, and local volunteers sewed articles for Belgian relief, most likely here in the ballroom.

- There are three kitchens in the building, the largest of which is connected to the ballroom. Now fitted with modern, industrial-size appliances, it is frequently used by caterers for the many events held in the building.
This upstairs room has long been the scene of musical rehearsals, recitals, meetings, receptions and social activities. It was the first ballroom in Michigan built with a spring floor designed for ballroom dancing. Debutante balls were held here, and it was the site of the popular St. Cecilia Valentine dance.

Originally, the Dexter Ballroom had windows that were open to the auditorium, making room for balcony seating. But the balcony opening was closed up and the balcony itself removed in 1925 because the structure caused acoustical problems for the auditorium below.

Today, SCMC continues to host events in the ballroom, the most frequent of which are pre- and post-concert receptions, which often give audience members the chance to meet the performing artists. Community members also have the opportunity to rent space in the building for their own events. The ballroom is consistently a popular West Michigan wedding venue.
The St. Cecilia building is home to one of the city’s greatest treasures—a magnificent Tiffany window—which measures five-and-a-half by six feet and was installed in October 1895, a year after the building was completed. It was commissioned by Mrs. T.H. Lyon, a charter St. Cecilia member, in memory of her daughter, Emma, a pianist and also a member.

The window was designed by the New York artist Frederick S. Church, who was a Grand Rapids native and whose mother was another St. Cecilia charter member. The famed Tiffany studio executed Church’s design. The window is made of Favrile glass, a special kind of glass that Tiffany himself developed, and its multiple layers control and focus light and add a depth of color and vibrancy. The original window was too big for its frame, so workers had to remove the bottom borders before it could be installed.

The window depicts St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music, seated at the organ and protected by two guardian angels. St. Cecilia is intentionally brighter than the angels.

In 1995, a century after its installation, the window had begun to sag and buckle and was taken down to be restored. Workers from a local glass company spent about 350 hours taking the window apart, recementing and resoldering the support structure and reassembling it. In 2016, a special lighting board was created to allow viewing of the window during the evening. Today this masterpiece hangs in all its original glory.

**FUN FACTS**

- Be careful not to confuse artist Frederick S. Church (1842-1924) with artist Frederic E. Church (1826-1900), a member of New York’s Hudson River School.

- Church used as his model for St. Cecilia Evelyn Nesbit, a showgirl who was the object of many men’s affections.
LOWER LEVEL

TERRYBERRY GALLERY

Opened in 1986, the Terryberry Art Gallery is a beautiful space that hosts monthly art exhibitions throughout the season. The gallery exhibits work by both well-known and newly emerging artists, and often shows two artists in order to combine unique styles and media.

MIKA LIBRARY

Long an unadorned storage room, the Mika Library was remodeled and refurbished during the 1985-87 renovation. Not only is it designed for music storage with paneling that matches the original paneling in the Idema Room, it is a popular spot for a variety of community and organization meetings and events.

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES

As a professional nonprofit organization, St. Cecilia Music Center employs several full- and part-time staff who work to uphold the organization’s original mission by presenting world-class artists, providing stellar music education opportunities, and preserving the historic building. The offices were renovated and modernized in 2016.