

Hinman College Chamber Music Society

In 1974, Vito Sinisi, Master of Hinman College, had an idea: “wouldn’t it be nice to have music on Sunday afternoons that students could come down and listen to for free.” With this dream in mind, Vito approached SUNY Binghamton President Clifford Clark and requested funding for a quartet to play chamber music in the Hinman Commons. Clark allocated funds so that four graduate assistantship positions were created to specifically play the chamber music. Vito then went down to the Music Department and was able to recruit four quartets made up of graduate students and faculty to play in the Hinman Commons.

The society’s musical director was Peter Marsh, first violinist of the Lenox Quartet and a Fellow of Hinman College. The Lenox Quartet sponsored four quartets in the Young Artists Program and Chamber Music Society. The function of the Young Artists Program and Chamber Music Society was to encourage young professionals dedicated to a career in chamber music. The program helped bring young musicians to SUNY Binghamton to study music, chamber music in particular. This could not have been a more perfect arrangement. Hinman offered these budding young musicians a place to perform and practice, and they in turn offered free entertainment and cultural sophistication to Hinmanites.¹

Surprisingly, the chamber music in the Hinman Commons was wildly successful. Many thought that college students during this time would be more interested in listening to rock ‘n roll and other more hip forms of music as opposed to the more classical music that the quartets played. However, students came out in droves to hear the quartets fill the Hinman Commons with the sweet melodies of classical music. The quartets played on Sunday evenings, usually around 7:00 p.m. to large crowds made up of both students and faculty. There was relatively

little advertising. A few small pamphlets and brochures, along with announcements in the *Hinman Halitosis* newsletter, constituted the advertising for the Chamber Music Society.

Sadly, chamber music in the Hinman Commons lasted only until the end of the decade. One reason it did not last was because, as many observers predicted all along, college students just weren't that interested in classical music and preferred listening to more youthful, contemporary bands. While it was surprisingly popular for a time, Hinmanites and the rest of the campus student body were drawn more to the upbeat, contemporary songs of their generation. Also, though it is not explicitly stated, during this time the entire State of New York as well as the SUNY system was going through perhaps its most severe financial crisis in its history and budget cutbacks were the norm. Money allotted for chamber music at a very small venue was probably seen by the university's bean counters as an unnecessary expenditure. That is probably the real reason why chamber music did not last in Hinman. Still, while it lasted, the Chamber Music Society provided a welcome break to students as well as an exposure and appreciation for classical music that they probably would not have had if Vito Sinisi had not gone to the lengths that he did to create this innovative program. Thirty years after he created the chamber music program in SUNY Binghamton, Vito Sinisi would say with a chuckle, "Anything is possible if you make a pest of yourself. I was the master of that."²

¹ "Hinman College Chamber Music Society," *Hinman Halitosis* Vol. V, No. 2, September 5, 1974.

² Vito Sinisi, "Hinman in the 1970's," April 23, 2003.