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Ending 50 years as host of Spoleto

By Bruce Smith

Associated Press

CHARLESTON, S.C. - It has been a pretty good run, as the performing arts go. Charles Wadsworth has hosted the popular chamber music concerts at Spoleto festivals on two continents for a half century.

"I figured it's 50 years and I haven't been fired yet and I should stop before I get fired," Wadsworth said in the understated Southern humor that made him an audience favorite first at the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy, and, since 1977, at the Spoleto Festival USA.

Wadsworth turns 80 today and the Spoleto Festival which opens tomorrow will be his last as he retires to a life of concerts and composing that may be only slightly less hectic.

The late composer Gian Carlo Menotti recruited Wadsworth, then a young pianist, to start a chamber music series for the Italian Spoleto that would also be accessible to a wide audience.

"We mixed instruments and voice and percussion and piano in a great repertoire much of which had not been heard," Wadsworth recalled this week. "Most of the public had only heard string quartets."

Menotti insisted that the audiences - both in Italy and later when he established the Charleston festival - arrive not knowing who is performing or what they will hear.

So Wadsworth, who in 1969 also founded the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, had to explain about the program and the performers.

In those early years he could speak little Italian and found the audience laughed at his fractured attempts.

"I was very aware that when people could laugh they immediately relaxed," he said, adding that the musicians also responded.

"I have never cared if anyone in the audience knows anything about chamber music," he said. "If that person out there is relaxed enough to let the art happen to them, then there is no problem."

Wadsworth was always comfortable in front of an audience, which he attributes to performing since he was 12 and to the Wednesday night prayer meetings at the Presbyterian church in his


hometown of Newnan, Ga.

There the minister invited the congregation to pray aloud. "I just loved that," Wadsworth laughed. "The congregation got to hate the fact I would stand up and start praying for everything you could think of. I'd just keep talking to the Lord and the people around me."

Wadsworth, hosting almost three dozen concerts a season, has been on stage more than any other Spoleto performer. The concerts he hosts routinely sell more than 90 percent of available tickets.

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