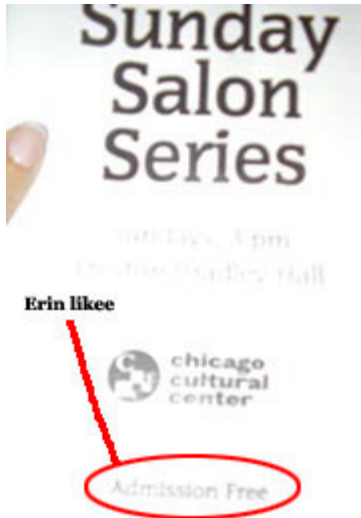


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Spending Sunday At The (Music) Salon

An afternoon of free-of-charge music.

[Erin Brereton](#) ✦ November 14, 2005



Since the city was kind enough to give me not one but two tickets this week (and a court date to boot), I felt that it should also be sweet enough to provide me with some no-cost entertainment. As luck would have it, the city did.

And I'm not talking about the viewing pleasure of getting pulled over while driving through the Gold Coast by two bike cops (although that appeared to be a fair amount of entertainment for those watching on the street). I'm talking about free tunes, the kind you might pay perfectly good money for at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra or [Ravinia](#).

Enter the [Chicago Cultural Center](#), 78 E. Washington, a bastion of free entertainment. From art to music to architecture (tours of the building's breathtaking interior are given every Wednesday, Friday and Saturday), there is a program (or several) to attend almost every day of the week.

In an effort to convince myself that Sundays are meant for more than hangovers, brunches and sleeping late, I headed over on what I believe scientists are calling the "windiest day of all time" to check out the Cultural Center's Sunday Salon Series, held weekly from September to May. The cost? Nada. It's totally free.

Held in the third-floor Preston Bradley Hall, an ornate dome-topped room that has more green and gold accents than the entire western half of Ireland, musicians come each week to perform select pieces that range from chamber music to pieces by Chinese composers.

Last Sunday, the tunes-du-jour were written in the 1500s and 1600s, featuring three sets of performers for a program that lasted just over an hour. At first glance, I realized that the two-year-old spinning in the corner and I brought the age quotient of the room down significantly: It was a mostly older, retirement-age group. (When the MC got up to thank us for coming and asked everyone to turn off their cell phone, hardly anyone moved because, I suspect, most people in the room didn't have one.)

There were the usual suspects you'd expect in a music performance audience (which numbered about 50): sweet little grandmas; the guy who looks like John Cleese; a man with what can only be described as a Gold Rush Moustache (who turned out to be one of the performers. Oops!)

But there were also a number of unexpected Sunday afternoon music fans, such as the goth

couple and the hipster crew who made their way in during the first performance, layered and pierced and wearing waist-to-pocket chains that jingled so loudly I at first wasn't sure if it was indie rock kids or Jacob Marley.

But what most impressed me wasn't the crowd, but how charismatic the performers were. Maybe it's because in my childhood piano-playing days, recitals were times to play and then exit quickly to allow time for self-criticism and degradation (and, if there were refreshments, perhaps a cookie).

But the Salon Series performers seemed downright jovial, both in the introductions they gave before playing and in the performances. And we're not talking college kids here: These are accomplished musicians who have played all over the world, who either teach or live locally.

The first performer, Phillip W. Serna, played the viola de gamba, an agreeable instrument that was not unlike a cello. Serna's piece was as smooth and polished as his charming introduction speech. So we clapped.

The next performer was David Schrader, who played a number of pieces with nimble, exacting fingers on the harpsichord. The harpsichord was so haunting and lovely it made me want to go hole up in a British haunted house with eight strangers and wait to die. Really, it did. His playing was fantastic.

The only dim spot was the just-a-little-too-lengthy opera at the end. It was a short opera, I'll give them that, and the male performer, Peter Van De Graaf, had boundless energy, but his partner, wife Kathleen, didn't match it and by the end of the character's relationship, neither did the audience: The kindly grandma to my right had dozed off, only to be awoken by the clapping, which she quickly joined in to. However, the Van De Graafs did dress in full period costume, including a powdered wig so fantastically big I couldn't tell at first if he was a barrister or a baritone, so I can't be too critical.

Overall, the crowd was happy to hear the free music. We clapped when performers walked out, after they introduced themselves, after they played and sometimes even after that: When David Schrader helped move his harpsichord so that he could accompany the Van De Graafs, he got applause for that, too.

And you know what, he deserved it. He once again played beautifully throughout the entire opera and, by the end, the harpsichord wasn't the only thing that was moved: The audience was, too.

Interested in taking in one of the upcoming Sunday Salon Series events? They start at 3 p.m. at the Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington. For more information on upcoming performers, click [here](#).

Erin Brereton is our resident urban cowgirl on a bi-weekly search for life on the cheap.