

The **Klaipėda Chamber Orchestra** (KCO) is one of Lithuania's youngest and most vibrant professional chamber ensembles. Since its foundation in 1992, the group of string players has striven consistently towards enrichment of the local musical scene with new traditions of orchestral music concerts. The Orchestra found permanent home and administrative support in the Klaipėda Concert Hall, a venue offering the year-round calendar of events and three annual festivals, where the Orchestra makes regular appearances as its resident ensemble. In programming events, it aims to stimulate and enlighten the audiences through dynamic performances, featuring a broad cross-section of musical styles and genres across the epochs.

The KCO's unique artistic style is primarily distinguished for the refined sense of (self-conducted) ensemble, which was achieved through long-term commitment of its individual members. The Orchestra's professional growth and sound quality have always been in the hands of talented string players, starting with its founding member and first artistic director, present principal violist, Liuda Kuraitienė. A more decisive turn to the new level of excellence and expansion of the repertoire was masterminded by cellist Mindaugas Bačkus who took over as the Orchestra's new artistic director in 2009. An experienced orchestral, ensemble musician and adventurous soloist himself, he sees an orchestra as "a way of life, a philosophy of one's relationship with music, a sense of artistic community." His farsighted approach soon yielded far-reaching results: in the past few years the Orchestra has gone through a series of master classes with Baroque music experts and started exploring early music repertoire; at the other end of classical music's timeline it has introduced no less challenging programmes, with a wide selection of 20th–21st century works and with a firm focus on Lithuanian contemporary music.

The KCO also continues to reach out to the young audiences by appearing as 'The Orchestra of Playful Music' in the educational series of the Klaipėda Concert Hall where it has showcased the best young talents in the country, shared the stage with the fictional characters of stories for kids in semi-theatrical productions, and last but not least, accompanied the world-famous 'pianist' cat Nora in the world premiere of the original *CATcerto* (2009) composed and conducted by Mindaugas Piečaitis, which received global media coverage, over four million clicks on Youtube, and an award from Guinness World Records for being the first concerto ever written for a cat, in 2010. In addition, it has put on two full-length musical theatre performances for kids: *Carnival of the Animals* to the music by Camille Saint-Saëns, produced in collaboration with the writer Laura Sintija Černiauskaitė and the Klaipėda Puppet Theatre (2009), and *Sophie Makes Music* after the story by Geoffroy de Pennart and with the original music by Zita Bružaitė (2011).

Over the two decades the KCO has become a prime exponent of cultural life in Klaipėda, currently setting its sights on national and international engagements. To date, it has performed at major music festivals and venues in Lithuania, as well as on international tours in Germany, Poland, Ukraine, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Italy, Switzerland and elsewhere. Both at home and on tour it has worked alongside a distinguished array of conductors and soloists, including Saulius Sondeckis, Robertas Šervenikas, Donatas Katkus, Vytautas Lukočius, Modestas Pitrenas, Martynas Staškus, Kaspar Zehnder, Aleksandar Markovič, Dante Anzolini, Mark Kadin, Reinhard Goebel, David Geringas, Mike Svoboda, Petras Geniušas, Andrius Žlabys, and Mūza Rubackytė. Some of these performances have been captured on disc "The Perfect Harmony of Sounds" released by the Klaipėda Concert Hall in 2009.

Among the highlights of the recent seasons, singular collaborations with the charismatic Moldovian-born American pianist Alexander Paley should be mentioned in the first place. He has appeared as both soloist and conductor in the performances of Bach's and Chopin's complete keyboard concerti before embarking on a series of seven concerts dedicated to Mozart's complete output for piano and orchestra (2010–2). In the spring 2013, this line of events was continued by young Lithuanian pianists (Gryta Tatorytė, Guoda Gedvilaitė, Lukas Geniušas, Edvinas Minkštimas and Kasparas Uinskas) who endeavoured all five Beethoven piano concerti in one concert, alongside the KCO enlarged with the wind section of the Liepaja Symphony Amber Sound Orchestra and conducted by Johannes Wildner. The Orchestra has also taken part in the performances of some old and new large-scale compositions for voices, choir and orchestra, such as Mozart's Requiem, Bach's Mass in B minor, *Te Deum* by Arvo Pärt, *Requiem in memoriam Stasys Lozoraitis* by Osvaldas Balakauskas, and *The Altar of Divine Mercy* by Algirdas Martinaitis.

The KKO's concert recording of Mozart's masterpieces with the Austrian piano legend Paul Badura-Skoda and Belarusian pianist Rostislav Krimer under the baton of Estonian conductor Andres Mustonen is to appear on the Estonian Record Productions label in 2014.