

Jazzy free concert fills Middleboro Town Hall with Broadway hits

MIDDLEBORO — Musical historian and singer John Murelle and pianist Chris Morris filled the Middleboro Town Hall ballroom with the songs and stories of composers George and Ira Gershwin on Feb. 15.

The event, held by the Peter H. Peirce Homestead, featured songs written by the brothers for various plays during the early 19th century interspersed with stories from their lives.

The two musicians wrote for Broadway shows and Hollywood films during the Jazz Age — both separately and together — until George Gershwin died at the age of 38. His older brother continued writing until the 1950s.

Murelle is a classically trained vocalist and works as a voice coach. He said he enjoys combining his talent for singing with his interest in history and knack for teaching.

He said the Gershwin brothers particularly caught his interest during his undergraduate studies at the University of Michigan, and has enjoyed learning about them and their composer peers since.

"I love how this all came about — these were usually Jewish immigrants that wanted to celebrate the American spirit as they knew how, and they wanted to create art," Murelle said. "Sometimes Broadway is kind of just entertainment, but they were really trying to create art."

He said many of the older adults in the audience were familiar with the songs he sang, but they know little about the lives of the composers.

For Murelle, teaching people about what they are listening to is a way to get them more engaged.

"An educated audience is an interested audience," he said.

Marie Durette, of Middleboro, came to the event after hearing about it from a friend.

She said the event featured songs she grew up listening to, particularly with her parents.

"My mother and father danced to them in the kitchen every week," Durette said. "We had a player piano in the house that had all these songs. My mom and father sang to them and danced to them, and we had a blast."

Paula Fay, director of the homestead, said the group has been organizing free Sunday afternoon concerts for about four years. She said they are an opportunity for people to

spend time in the community without spending any money.

She said it is also an opportunity to enjoy different forms of music, as the group invites performers from many different genres.

Murelle first performed in Middleboro last year, and Fay said he received a standing ovation after that performance.

"It was our first time since we had started the program that I actually had the whole crowd stand up, and I went, 'Okay, he's coming back,'" she said.