Pasadena hits a new cultural plateau with
Levitt Pavilion's inaugural concert

By Judy Seckler

Whether you're a parent with children, a grandparent, single and unattached, disabled or hyper energetic, there's a performance tailored just for you at the Levitt Pavilion for the Performing Arts Concert Series.

The free concert series, a culmination of three years of planning, rolls out its inaugural concert at 7 p.m. Sunday at the Memorial Park Band Shell, located at the corner of Raymond Avenue and Walnut Street. The night's program features "Singin' and Swingin' with Cheryl Connelly," vocal interpretations by an area jazz veteran.

But if jazz is not your thing, there's much more to choose from.

Concerts are scheduled five nights a week from Wednesdays through alternating Saturdays and Thursdays, world beat on Fridays, anything goes on Saturdays and jazz fusion and blues on Sundays.

A complete schedule of performances is posted on the Web site — www.LevittPavilionPasadena.org. The biggest problem will be staking out a patch of grass at the park early enough to catch all the action.

Never before has Pasadena been able to offer such a cultural smorgasbord to its residents at no cost.

"Everybody loves the venue. It's plush and beautiful," said Barbosa Polverini, co-chair of the Friends of the Levitt Pavilion, a group of community volunteers that make up the fundraising arm of the project. Polverini and her contractor husband have overseen the renovation of the park's neglected band shell. Repairs have been made to structural components and lighting and sound systems have been installed. A ramped pathway for the disabled, a green room, dressing room and bathroom has been added. An archway identifying the entryway to the park is still being built just a few short weeks before opening night. "I'm a nervous wreck," Polverini said.

Mortimer Levitt, a 96-year-old philanthropist, retired entrepreneur, and gallery owner, and his wife, Mimi, who emigrated to the United States from Vienna and became the senior assistant to Alfred H. Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York after World War II, started a foundation in 1963 with $10 million to support cultural and educational causes.

The Levitt Pavilion's first free summer arts festival in Westport, Conn., is now celebrating its 30th anniversary as a cultural event. Because of the success of that series, the foundation kicked off a Levitt Pavilion in Harrisburg.

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Pa., on June 11 and has also made a commitment to bringing Levitt Pavilions to the West Coast.

Their daughter, Elizabeth Levitt Hirsch, vice president of the Mortimer Levitt Foundation and a member of its board of directors, said, “This is the most exhilarating project I’ve ever been asked to shepherd.”

Hirsch said City Manager Cynthia Kurtz had asked her early on why the foundation chose Pasadena.

“It takes a special community to respond to the offer of the Levitt Pavilion,” said Hirsch, alluding to the fact that while the foundation provides generous seed money, additional funds have to be raised by the participating community. Philanthropy, community and government come together to “enhance a public-private partnership. This happened because of the leadership Pasadena inspires in its community membership,” she said.

The Mortimer Levitt Foundation contributed $250,000 to the renovation of the park’s band shell, landscaping the grounds, as well as updating the lighting and sound systems. It will contribute another $100,000 over five years for a total of $500,000 to continue the series. The friends held two fund-raisers, one on June 22 and another on July 10 to support performer contracts and public relations costs. The goal is to raise $150,000 for the season. So far a portion has been raised, according to Polverini. “The goal is going to be met. It’s just a cash flow situation,” she said.

Anyone with roots in Pasadena may remember when the band shell was the home to community sing-a-longs in the 1940s and regular concerts and performances up until the early 1950s. It was constructed in 1930 at a cost of $5,000. At the time, it was the largest of its kind on the West Coast. The winning design was determined by a juried competition held by the Pasadena Architectural Club. It was dedicated on Memorial Day with a crowd of more than 2,500 and a special tribute was made to veterans.

In bringing back an ongoing cultural platform to Pasadena, the foundation’s mission is dedicated to improving the quality of life throughout the community by fostering neighborhood interaction and involvement while celebrating cultural diversity.

Mortimer Levitt, a high school dropout, made his name operating a chain of shops that offered custom-made shirts at prices comparable to ready-made merchandise with customers that included Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Baines Johnson and Jimmy Carter and local politicians such as former New York City Mayor Ed Koch.

As his business grew to 80 stores, he was eventually able to branch out and pursue his interest in the visual and performing arts, inspired by his wife, Levitt opened the Mortimer Levitt Gallery in Manhattan in the 1940s. He was the founder of the Manhattan Theater Club, a board member of the Lincoln Center Film Society and acted as the chairman of Young Concert Artists for 27 years.

Coralie “CJ” Whitcomb, executive director of the Friends of the Levitt Pavilion, described what the launch of the series would mean to the community, “It’s a fusion for the city ... to sit among the stars and enjoy the universal language of music.”

Elizabeth Hirsch registers continuous amazement over the many local people who have worked to make the series happen.

“My fervent hope is that the community learns about it and comes to enjoy it. We want people to touch it, see it and feel it with their friends,” she said.