

Bravissimo for Music on the Hill!

By Russ Waterman

For 33 years, Music on the Hill, a nonprofit organization in East Greenwich, has been dedicated to presenting the community with chamber music concerts by well-known performers and ensembles, enthraling audiences who love the small and intimate setting.

Yet it is possible Music on the Hill will reach an historic crescendo in popularity this June when the 2008 Festival Series of live chamber music commences. The reason: a revamped Board of Directors that hasn't missed a beat in again attracting nationally and internationally renowned talent, but this time featuring more Rhode Island-bred musicians (15) than ever. Billed as "the 34th season featuring returning RI Musicians and Friends (www.musiconthehillri.com), the gala kick-off for the 2008 season is June 4 at the Federal Reserve Restaurant in Providence complete with appetizers, a mini-concert and dessert.

"This will give us a chance to introduce chamber music to new audiences," says Artistic Director John Mark Pellegrino, the assistant principal bassist of the Columbus (OH) Symphony Orchestra and a double bass player in this season's festival. "There will be opportunities to interact and socialize with the musicians. We want to reach out to a broad audience."

The Festival Series continues with a traditional concert on June 5 at the First Baptist Church of America in Providence; a mini-concert on June 7 at St. Luke's Church in East Greenwich; a concert for Warwick elementary students at Toll Gate High School on June 9 and then two traditional concerts--one on June 13 at St. Gregory the Great Church in Coweset and the Farewell concert on June 14 at St. Luke's.

The Music on the Hill performers this season are: Jennifer Parker-Harley; flute; Anne Marie Gabriele, oboe; Daniel Gilbert; clarinet; Michael Parker-Harley; bassoon; Michelle Reed Baker and Roland Pandolfi, horn; Christina Breindel and Jason Hardink; piano; Kristen Pellegrino, Deborah Tien Price, and Evan Price; violin; Suzanne LeFevre and Margo Romig Motycka; viola; Trevor Handy, Elisa Kohanski; Paul Kushious, Ron Leonard and Mark Motycka; cello and John Mark Pellegrino, double bass (also Artistic Director).

If many of the returning musicians aren't familiar in Rhode Island now, it is only because their geographic horizons have vastly expanded since cutting their music teeth here. Some always return here, a few live here year-round, others consider it a second home and most of the musicians know each other because "music is such a small world and tight-knit community," notes John Mark Pellegrino.



LEADING THE WAY: John Mark Pellegrino is the Festival's Artistic Director, the Assistant Principal Bassist of the Columbus (OH) Symphony Orchestra and a double bass player in this season's festival.

ON STAGE: Jennifer Parker-Harley is one of the festival musicians. She is presently the Instructor of Flute at Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio. In the summer of 2007, she began a new post as coordinator of the NFA Orchestral Masterclass Competition.



Yet, some have never stopped playing here, even if only playing occasionally. Christina Breindel, an adjunct faculty member of Rhode Island College and highly-regarded accompanist and piano teacher in Rhode Island, formed the piano trio Chrysalis in 1999 with violinist Kristen Pellegrino and cellist Elisa Kohanski and have performed in venues all over the state ever since.

But this assemblage of musicians has already distinguished themselves regionally, nationally, and even worldwide with their musical talents, most of them spreading their wealth of knowledge and music experiences by continuing to learn, teach and perform. In pursuing and earning master's and even doctoral degrees, they have received training, education and experience at such prestigious schools for music as The Juilliard School, Eastman School of Music, New England Conservatory, Oberlin Conservatory of Music and so many others where they have mastered and learned their craft.

Violinist Lisa Dempsey has performed in concerts with Luciano Pavarotti and Placido Domingo. Deborah Tien Price has played for Linda Ronstadt, Joni Mitchell, Rod Stewart, Barry Manilow, Smokey Robinson, and Johnny Mathis. Elisa Kohanski has performed with Olivia Newton John, Garrison Keillor, Robert Shaw, and John Tesh.

And their musical horizons have expanded so much they have made an impact in Canada, Norway, France,

Germany, England, Spain, Belgium, Australia and other corners of the globe where they have lived and gone to school or played in orchestras, chamber music ensembles, performed as soloists and made recordings.

Yet the tie binding so many of these gifted musicians together is the one to Rhode Island. Their formal training began with elementary, high school, college or private teachers and experiences in the Ocean State and they were encouraged and nurtured here.

Carol Pellegrino has certainly been one of those connections. Pellegrino, the Executive Director of the Warwick National HS Orchestra Festival and retired Orchestra Director of Toll Gate HS was a violinist with the Rhode Island Philharmonic Orchestra and String Quartet. A long-time music educator, she has a private viola/violin teaching studio.

Besides daughter Kristen, Carol has taught or influenced several of this year's Music on the Hill performers, including John Mark, her nephew. "Many of these musicians are still young and excited about what they are doing and are very excited about coming together," Carol says. "They will bring a vibrancy to the festival."

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"We were all taught and inspired by our parents," John Mark says of the profound influence of the Pellegrino family, including his aunt, who taught him cello and parents John, current President of the Board and retired Professor of Music from Rhode Island College, and Alice Pellegrino, retired Assistant Professor of Music Education at the Henry Barnard School, Rhode Island College.

John Mark was introduced to the monolin by the instrument's inventor, Rhode Island College professor Robert Currier. His aunt, Carol Pellegrino, eventually helped teach him to play the cello. He went on to play the double bass. And with Rhode Island Philharmonic Youth Orchestra conductor Nedo Pandolfi encouraging him to further his studies, he eventually earned a masters degree from the Juilliard School of Music.

One of the state's legendary music figures, Roland Pandolfi (Nedo's brother) is playing, too. His horn studies were fostered by Russell Leber, a member of the Rhode Island Philharmonic and became a member of the Rhode Island Junior Philharmonic at age 15. Later he was principal horn of the Milwaukee Symphony before joining the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra also as principal horn. Several times a soloist at the International Horn Society Workshops, Pandolfi is currently Professor of Horn at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music.

John Mark Pellegrino, also a member of the Board, is one of the primary architects of this festival. "It was serendipitous," he explains of the changing of the guard for Music on the Hill. It was during last summer at a recital with his cousin Kristen Pellegrino, Suzanne Lefevre, Elisa Kohanski and Christina Breindel, that a new direction and plan for Music on the Hill crystallized.

WILL PERFORM: Elisa Kohanski, a native of Warwick, is Principal Cellist of the Wheeling Symphony and performs with several other orchestras, Philharmonic and the Columbus Symphony Orchestra. She serves as adjunct faculty at Grove City College and Seton Hill University.



"This is a unique event," he says of bringing so many Ocean State native musicians together. "Nothing like this has ever been attempted." Nor will classical music be the exclusive type of music played. "We will play jazz, rock and lots of different kinds of music," John states. "The first concert will be all jazz played on classical instruments by classically-trained musicians." Of course, he adds, classical music will comprise a major portion of other concerts.

"I like to play in chamber music because you get to really influence what's happening," says Elisa Kohanski, who is thrilled to be involved. "There's a lot of interplay between the performers and you can feel the energy."

Meanwhile, the push is on to publicize the series with 20,000 free program booklets being distributed throughout the state. "You will get to read about us and the music," John Mark says. With ticket sales only supporting half the cost of presenting the concerts, there are opportunities to become sponsors and patrons of Music on the Hill. And concert tickets will be offered at a very low price. "We also would like to donate 10 percent of the ticket sales to the Rhode Island Tomorrow Fund," John Mark adds.

"Our goal is to keep the series alive and keep it casual and accessible," he concludes, noting more concerts might be offered, perhaps in June when the musicians get together. He might not have to worry, though. With this power-laden lineup of musical talent, the series could thrive.

*For more information, go to the website,
www.musiconthehillri.com or write to
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