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Music on the Hill is reborn

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By Channing Gray (Journal Arts Writer)

During a trip home last spring to his native Rhode Island, bass player John Mark Pellegrino had a brainstorm: put together a chamber music festival that would bring back Rhode Island-bred musicians who have left the state to take jobs around the nation.

It would be a chance for some of the state's best and brightest classical players to return to the fold.

Pellegrino, assistant principal with the Columbus Symphony in Ohio, made some calls and was met with an enthusiastic response. He was able to round up 16 players to take part in a 10-day festival that gets under way Wednesday at the Federal Reserve restaurant in Providence.

Other programs are being held at St. Luke's Church in East Greenwich, St. Gregory's Church in Warwick and the First Baptist Church in America at the bottom of Providence's College Hill.

"There's this real excitement among all of us to honor, thank and give back to this community that's so rich and so strong in art and classical music," said Pellegrino, the festival's artistic director.

"All I got was enthusiasm when I started contacting people."

Actually, not all the players are Rhode Islanders. In some cases, spouses have been included in the lineup, or close friends from music school, who used to share holiday meals at the Pellegrino home.

But most of the performers grew up here and got their start in local youth orchestras, where they became fast friends. Now they are scattered about the country playing with orchestras and chamber ensembles.

Some of them have not performed here since becoming professionals.

The idea of a chamber festival featuring native talent had been on Pellegrino's mind for some time. When he returned home to visit family, he'd think about how nice it would be to perform here.

Then, last spring, he got together with his cousin, violinist Kristen Pellegrino, who is working on a doctorate at the University of Michigan but plays with a piano trio when she returns for a visit. They put together a quintet and gave a concert at St. Luke's Church in East Greenwich. About 200 people showed up.

At that point, Pellegrino jumped on the idea of the festival.

"It has been percolating in my mind for some time," he said, "but that day it was going 100 miles an hour."

The new festival is called Music on the Hill, the name of a series that took place at St. Luke's for many years but was disbanding. Pellegrino's father, John, a retired Rhode Island College trumpeter, was a member of Music on the Hill's board, and it was decided the series would turn over its name and non-profit status to this new venture.

John Mark Pellegrino, in fact, comes from a large and influential musical clan. His father was for many years principal trumpeter with the Rhode Island Philharmonic, and his mother taught music at the Henry Barnard School. His aunt, Carol, was head of the Toll Gate High School orchestra in Warwick. Cousin Kristen took over the orchestra in 1999, before returning to school in Michigan.

If just the friends and students of the Pellegrinos bought tickets to the festival, it would probably sell out.



Flutist Jennifer Parker-Harley and John Mark Pellegrino, bassist and artistic director of Music on the Hill.

John Mark Pellegrino said he would like to see a series featuring Rhode Island talent held once again during the regular fall-to-spring season, then put on the festival in June. Because it would be hard for a group of players to get away during the regular orchestra season, he said it's more likely the series would feature single performers who had a free weekend.

But for now he is concentrating on pulling off this first festival.

Part of the hook for the event is attracting listeners who are not hard-core chamber music fans. Two of the five concerts are casual affairs that will mix food and drink with the music.

On June 7, the festival will host an American-themed "culinary concert" at St. Luke's 99 Peirce St., East Greenwich. The evening starts with an hour of appetizers and wine in the church courtyard, then moves inside for about 50 minutes of music.

On tap is an arrangement of Cole Porter's *Begin the Beguine* and works by other American composers with a pop flavor. Paul Schoenfield's *Café Music* blends Viennese, gypsy, light classical and Broadway sounds, while Morton Gould's *Benny's Gig* pays tribute to jazz great Benny Goodman. Bill Douglas' 2006 *Suite Cantando* sounds like a jazz improvisation.

After the music, patrons will have a chance to meet the performers over dessert and coffee.

The concert this Wednesday at the Federal Reserve follows a similar format. *Hors d'oeuvres* and drinks will be served at 6 p.m. and at 7:30 p.m. a sampler of the music featured during the festival will be heard.

"I ran this by my buddies and relatives who are not musicians," said Pellegrino, "and they said that sounds like a party. And that's what we want to do — eat, drink, hear some music, and hang out and socialize."

But there will be a chance to hear more mainstream classical fare in traditional settings, too.

On June 5, music of Mozart, Reinecke and Schulhoff, along with a set of variations by Rhode Island-born composer Sebastian Currier, make up the program at the First Baptist Church in American, 75 North Main St., Providence.

Mozart, Mendelssohn and Rebecca Clark will be featured on the June 13 program at St. Gregory's Church, 360 Cowesett Rd., Warwick. The final concert, June 14 at St. Luke's, pairs the G Minor Quintet of Prokofiev and Beethoven's Septet in E-Flat.

Besides Pellegrino and his cousin, Kristen, who has played with the Chagall and Satory string quartets, the festival is bringing in jazz violinist Evan Price, a 10-year veteran of the acclaimed Turtle Island Quartet, which specializes in pop arrangements. His wife, Deborah Tien Price, who has been a member of the Norwegian Opera Orchestra, learned violin in a fourth-grade string program started by Carol Pellegrino.

The line-up also includes Rhode Islanders Lisa Dempsey, associate concertmaster of the Chattanooga Symphony, Elisa Kohanski, principal cellist with the Wheeling Symphony of West Virginia, and pianist Jason Hardink, chief keyboardist for the Utah Symphony and Opera.

Roland Pandolfi, brother of legendary Rhode Island music educator Nedo Pandolfi, played principal horn for the St. Louis Symphony for 35 years. He currently teaches at Oberlin Conservatory of Music.

Anne Marie Gabriele is second oboist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Pellegrino said there are more musicians who would like to take part in the festival, but had other commitments. If things go well this year, he is hoping to increase the number of performers next time.

"We're excited about it," said board member Carol Pellegrino, "and a little nervous."

Tickets to Wednesday's opening gala are \$75, \$125 for couples, and \$35 for the culinary concert on June 7. The other concerts on June 5, 13, and 14 cost \$15. Send checks to Music on the Hill, P.O. Box 633, East Greenwich, RI 02818, or call (401) 884-8172. Tickets will also be available at the door.