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Classical Notes: Hyde Hall keeps it busy

Joseph Dalton

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George Clarke's flute in the parlor at Hyde Hall
Joseph Dalton



Ann-Marie Barker Schwartz spent her summer with music. That may not come as much of a surprise, given that she's the founding director of Musicians of Ma'alwyck and a longtime member of the orchestra at the Glimmerglass Festival, among other affiliations and obligations. But like many of us, she was rather flummoxed in late March when her calendar was suddenly wiped clear. "There was one cancellation after another and I wondered, am I still a musician?" It was a weird frame of mind," she recalls.

From the void, new projects have sprung. They include a series of live streamed concerts and a weekly musical journal written by Schwartz. But top of the list is a CD that was recorded in late July in the formal dining room of Hyde Hall, the historic home located on a scenic bluff across Otsego Lake from the Alice Busch Opera Theater in Cooperstown. The disc, to be released next year, will be the group's second commercial release.

If there's a historic house in the region, it's likely that Schwartz has put on an event there. The Musicians of Ma'alwyck has a long and fruitful association with the Schuyler Mansion in Albany, where they put on concerts every season. The group's first CD, released in 2018, was titled "Music from the Schuyler Mansion." It was only a matter of time until Schwartz, who has a second home in nearby Cherry Valley, brought music to Hyde Hall, which has been designated as a national historic landmark. The affiliation with Musicians of Ma'alwyck began in 2018 and continued with a residency the following year. A third annual Mother's Day concert plus some other events were scheduled for this season. When that all got scrubbed because of the coronavirus, Schwartz recalls, Jonathan Maney, Hyde Hall's CEO, suggested that if concerts were out then they should find another collaboration, maybe a CD? That's an offer few musicians would pass up. According to Schwartz, Hyde Hall did more than just provide a venue, it was a financial partner as well. A few grants from local sources were also obtained in short order. "Usually raising money takes time, but this came together very quickly," says Schwartz.

Music has actually had a long history at Hyde Hall. The main house was completed in 1820 under the supervision of George Clarke, but it was his son, George Clarke, Jr. and his family, who were the first to fully occupy it. George Junior was an avid flute player and his instrument plus a collection of his sheet music are archived at Hyde Hall. The elder George must have been a music enthusiast as well. Schwartz recalls seeing his name in the membership roster of the Albany Euterpean Club, a musical society that flourished in the 1820s and was the subject of Schwartz's masters thesis. She points out that Clarke's journeying from Cooperstown to Albany for club events is evidence of his commitment to music. As for George Clarke, Jr., Schwartz thinks he must have been a pretty advanced player judging from his music, which includes solos, duos and trios. One of the pieces, "Otsego Waltz," will be included on the forthcoming CD. The balance of the disc is devoted to opera transcriptions for flute, violin and guitar with selections from Bellini ("Norma"), Rossini ("La Cenerentola") and Meyerbeer ("The Huguenots") among others.

Schwartz hopes that the operatic material will be familiar and enjoyable to audiences. Yet there might be more than audience appeal in her programming decision. Perhaps the new disc is also a reflection of her feeling about losing a summer at Glimmerglass. "I'm totally missing the opera but if I did the opera, we couldn't have done the CD," she says.

Remembering Petia Kassarova

On July 20, cellist Petia Kassarova died after a five-year battle with ovarian cancer. She was a member of the Albany Symphony and upon her death, music director David Alan Miller wrote a loving tribute, saying, "She was a brilliant artist and teacher, and one of the most thoughtful, gentlest people I have known."

Kassarova was also a founding member of the Musicians of Ma'alwyck. Schwartz remembers her as a colleague and also a close friend, saying, "In a group of sort of staid, scholarly chamber musicians, she was our Maserati (a Bulgarian version of course!) -- sleek, luxurious and a bit dangerous. When Petia revved up to play a solo, you knew that you were in for an exciting ride." Schwartz recalls many standout chamber music performances by Kassarova, including in Schoenberg's "Verklarte Nacht," Gardner's Piano Quintet, and the Brahms String Sextet No. 1 in B flat major, Op. 18. Her final appearance with the ensemble was a joyous evening of waltzes and polkas at the Viennese Ball on Feb. 29 in downtown Albany. "That's a nice memory, she looked beautiful and happy," recalls Schwartz.

Just days after Kassarova died, the Musicians of Ma'alwyck's remaining core members – Schwartz, violin, Norman Thibodeau, flute and Sten Isachsen, guitar – gathered at Hyde Hall for the recording sessions. Schwartz describes the loss of Kassarova as "a shadow hanging over us."

Musical Treasure Chest

In early April, Schwartz launched a weekly email to patrons and friends, saying "During our Covid-19 isolation, I thought you might enjoy hearing about the musical works and artists that I turn to when I want inspiration, release or just the sheer joy of listening to a certain passage thrillingly executed."

"Ann Marie's Musical Treasure Chest" has had 16 editions since then and Schwartz has shared insights about the Franck Violin Sonata, Massenet's opera "Werther," and the Bach B Minor Mass, among many other repertoire items. She also explains how the musical works fit into her life including her years as an announcer on WMHT-FM, producing CDs for Dorian Recordings, and as a member of the Glimmerglass Orchestra. There's no musical jargon just plenty of enthusiasm, vivid memories and links to some good clips on YouTube. All of the essays are archived at musiciansofmaalwyck.org.

"I started these as a way of using music to make my life feel more normal," says Schwartz. "I get tons of good feedback and plan to continue until concert life returns or if I think they're getting stale. They just flow out right now."

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