

Musicians of Ma'alwyck unites historic sites with music of their era

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SARATOGA SPRINGS, N.Y. — Today there is a trend towards immersive and interactive experiences in all forms of entertainment.

Actually, the ensemble chamber group Musicians of Ma'alwyck have been ahead of the curve. For over 20 years, they have been performing music in historical buildings that were inhabited in the same era the music was created.

Tomorrow night they are doubling down on that formula.

They are offering a cd release party to celebrate their second album – “Hyde Hall and the Silver Goddess: Operatic Brilliance of Auber, Bellini, Meyerbeer and Rossini.” The cd was recorded at Hyde Hall in Cooperstown. It is a space where the same music was performed when the house was inhabited by the Clarke Family in the 1830s and 40s.

As if this isn't historically fascinating or charming enough, the Musicians of Ma'alwyck's founder-director and violinist, Ann-Marie Schwartz, has selected Caffè Lena as the host site for the cd release engagement.

Caffè Lena has been operating since 1960 and is the oldest continually running coffee house in the United States. In the world of folk music, it is considered one of the most important music establishments of the second half of the 20th century.

However, there is a small contemporary cloud over the union between 18th and 20th century music. Because of the COVID pandemic, there will be no live audience. It is available only on Caffè Lena's You Tube Chanel. It takes place tomorrow night at 8 p.m.

At first glance the marriage between the home of a 19th century millionaire and a 20th century proletarian coffee house might seem an odd arrangement. Classical music and folk do not seem comfortable companions.

Schwartz disagrees, pointing out that before-they-were-famous, composers like Brahms and Schubert frequently performed in the coffee houses of their era. Schwartz argues that Lena's is an ideal location for the event, saying, “When you enter Caffè Lena, history hangs over you.”

And combining history and music is what drives Schwartz. After graduating college as a music major, the Schenectady native joined the Albany Symphony as a violinist. At the same time, she took a job as an overnight host on classical musical station WMHT.

The radio station permitted her total access to their extensive musical library where she discovered a treasure trove of over 20,000 albums, many of which had been forgotten. Inspired by her discoveries, she enrolled in SUNY-Albany and earned a Masters in the self-created field of Early-American Music.

In 1999 she formed Musicians of Ma'alwyck, which devotes itself to performing historical music at area venues, but especially historical sites. For 21 years, they've been the resident company at Schuyler Mansion and play regularly at Ten Broeck Mansion in Albany, Crailo in Rensselaer, Hyde Hall and other historic sites.

Indeed, this year when the pandemic forced a Mother's Day concert at Hyde Hall to be cancelled, she was granted access to the historic buildings vast collection of transcripts of 19th century operas. At the suggestion and with the support of Hyde Hall they produced this cd. "It was a gift and a windfall for which I am eternally grateful," she says, as she praises the Hall's executive director Jonathan Maney and the entire staff.

She explains that in the early to mid-1800s, the nation was becoming devoted to opera. "They couldn't get enough of it," she says. Since the Clarke family was extremely wealthy, they, like other prominent families, frequently had social gatherings centered on chamber opera presentations.

Schwartz says to play those same concerts where they were performed almost two-hundred years ago is a rare and unique event for both performer and audience. "The sense of place adds warmth and beauty to the experience," she says.

Just as important, she believes these feelings transmit to the cd. "There is something about the authenticity of the music and site of the performance that reaches out on the cd," she says.

The music offered at the release party will try to capture the flavor of both Hyde Hall and Caffe Lena. On Friday they are only doing two operas from the recording. They are also

performing other pieces from their regular repertoire and two pieces by Beethoven to honor his 250th anniversary.

However, the piece that connects the two venues is “The Otsego Polka,” a piece written in 1847. Its inscription describes the work as “a tribute to the young ladies of Mrs. Cotes Seminary in Springfield, N.Y.,” which is near Hyde Hall. Schwartz says it captures the flavor and the lighthearted mood of the era. However, she adds that the sounds of fiddles in the piece makes you think it might have been created with Caffe Lena in mind.

It’s a lovely thought that a plunk of a string can connect hundreds of years of music.

The cd release party for “Hyde Hall and the Silver Goddess...” is held 8 p.m. Friday, February 26. It’s available on the You Tube channel of Caffe Lena. The cost of the cd is \$15 (plus shipping and handling) and is available at musiciansofmaalwyk.org