

The world on a string

Ann-Marie Barker Schwartz is a whirlwind of activity on the local music scene, and not bad on the dance floor either

Geraldine Freedman/For The Daily Gazette

| November 29, 2019



[0](#) Ann-Marie Barker Schwartz, 2nd from left, with Musicians of Ma'alwyck; and ballroom dancing with husband Dr. Charles Schwartz.

Photographer: photos provided

Violinist, record producer, DJ, researcher, founder of musical groups . . . the list goes on, all held together by one thing.

“Classical music is the great love of my life,” said Ann-Marie Barker Schwartz.

For the last 20 years, local audiences know her as the violinist and founder of Musicians of Ma'alwyck, a chamber music ensemble that specializes in music of the 18th and 19th centuries that was performed in this country. But there's much more under her umbrella.

To begin with, Barker Schwartz is a hometown girl; her family's roots are from Alabama but she was born in Schenectady and graduated from Niskayuna High School, Class of 1978.

“My mom was a piano major at the University of Alabama,” Barker Schwartz said. “She was from a farm family — they grew cotton — and was the first generation to go to college. But she didn't go into music. Instead, she got her PhD in psychology. Dad was in physics and when he got a job in the G.E. Research lab, they moved up here.”

Music ran in the family. Barker Schwartz started piano at age 5 and violin in the third grade. Her younger brother was a trumpeter. He now is an engineer. But Barker Schwartz stayed with music and attended Boston University. After graduation, she sought an orchestral job and landed an opening at 22 in the string section of the Albany Symphony Orchestra.

In those days, there were far fewer ASO concerts, so she also got a job with WMHT Radio in 1982 to do the midnight to 6 a.m. shift.

“There was no satellite then so there were four shifts a day. It was live programming with an engineer and I got to pick my own recordings from their library of 20,000 LPs,” she said. “It was a fabulous opportunity and I thought it was manna from heaven. It was a treasure trove and like a great music history class. It was unbelievable ... such an incredible gift.”

Barker Schwartz kept both jobs until 1989 when everything changed.

“I got the Glimmerglass Opera summer job, which was 12 weeks (playing in the pit orchestra),” she said. “It was the first year they were in the opera house. Then my shift at the radio station changed to 6 a.m. to noon. I did both for a while, but then it was not viable, so I quit the radio (but kept the opera gig, which she still does). I was also teaching violin.”

She'd also added another commitment two years before. One of her stand partners at the opera was violinist Rob Taylor. They knew each other from having played with the Schenectady Symphony Orchestra. But playing chamber music was something both were interested in doing. One day he suggested they start a chamber orchestra, Barker Schwartz said.

In 1987, the two violinists founded the St. Cecilia Chamber Orchestra. Over the next 10 years, the freelance group played numerous concerts with a wide range of repertoire in various venues throughout the Capital Region. During that period Barker Schwartz also became involved with Dorian Recordings through her association at WMHT as a producer, where she dealt with the artists, the repertory and determined the quality of their recordings. Dorian is now out of business but Barker Schwartz still independently produces records for Rebel, a baroque ensemble.

In 1994, her personal life changed when she met and married Dr. Charles Schwartz, a local pathologist who was also an organist and singer. Over the next many years, his baritone would grace several of MOM's concerts.

However, in 1997 Barker Schwartz's busy life took a turn.

“I had my first son, Erich, and we moved to Scotia,” she said. “I left the ASO, St. Cecilia had folded and I took a year maternity leave. I began teaching at Schenectady County Community College and Siena College and was playing chamber music ... just getting by.”

Forming group

Two years later, and getting restless, Barker Schwartz decided to found a chamber music group: Musicians of Ma’alwyck — a Dutch name for the Scotia area.

“It started as a string quartet but that was not the medium that was really popular in colonial times,” she said. “It was cello and guitar and flute. Instruments that were transportable.”

Since repertoire drives the instrumentation, Barker Schwartz considered who to ask to play.

“I knew flutist Norm Thibodeau since a high school youth orchestra. Cellist Petia Kassarova I knew from the Albany Symphony. And I met Sten Isachsen at SCCC and was really impressed with his passion for playing guitar,” she said.

Part of the reason for focusing her group’s repertoire on the early centuries came from playing a concert at the Schuyler Mansion New York State Historic Site in Albany built in 1761.

“I was interested in the mansion and doing programming that reflected the history of Albany,” she said. “But I was baffled when I found only snippets of background. So I was inspired to find out more.”

Barker Schwartz went back to school in 1999 and got her master’s degree in history at SUNY Albany.

“They allowed me to specialize in musical history,” she said. “Our history is parallel but not parallel to European history. We were absorbing their traditions but in a cruder way.

Programs were only in newspapers, nothing was printed for concerts. Then I got a residency at the Mansion. They have such a supportive staff, they were more partners.”

Barker Schwartz had her second son Christoph that year.

National attention

Over the last several years, MOM has flourished particularly since Barker Schwartz has discovered repertoire long thought lost or forgotten in the state’s Special Collections at the state library. One of the most notable finds was to discover an opera written by William Shield that was one of George Washington’s favorites. Premiered in 1783, Barker Schwartz revised it for a 2009 performance that drew national attention.

The group, which still includes its founding members, has been named Best Chamber Music Ensemble in the Capital Region twice, performed for television producer Norman Lear in

celebration of his 2002 purchase of the last private copy of the Declaration of Independence, and was nominated for this year's Eddie Music Award. A popular feature of some of MOM's concerts that draws crowds is a buffet or dinner after the concert at local restaurants, or special events like the real fencing match done last year coupled with period music, or this season's "Macabre Music" concert that was held in October.

"It's pulling in the culture of the period. It's not just music," she said. "It makes it very real. People come for the history and hear the music. And they'll hear the music like it was. It resonates. It's special."

Support has been strong to allow MOM to commission Max Caplan — a former composition student at Union College who impressed Barker Schwartz with his skills, to write an opera in 2018, "Aleda, or the Flight of the Suff Birdwomen," and a new piece that premiered in October. And this summer, MOM was given a residency at Hyde Hall, near Glimmerglass Opera, to present three concerts.

MOM's schedule this fall included a Nov. 3 program at the Mansion, "Eliza," that celebrated Elizabeth Schuyler, the wife of Alexander Hamilton, and featured actress/singer Eileen Mack with period music. A dinner at Café Capriccio followed.

There were also performances of "Eliza" at the Albany Institute of History & Art on Nov. 23 and the Arkell Museum in Canajohaire on Nov. 24.

Consult MOM's website, musiciansofmaalwyck.org for the three concerts in 2020. The group also gives concerts at various retirement centers, local libraries, private historic-related parties, and their Dec. 22 holiday concert at the Ten Broeck Mansion in Albany.

Ballroom dancers

Barker Schwartz may be nearing 60 but she's no couch potato. She and her husband enjoy a non-classical music activity: ballroom dancing. It all started in 2009 when MOM had a fundraiser with a dancing competition similar to "Dancing with the Stars."

"We worked really hard and we came in second," Barker Schwartz said laughing.

Inspired by how much fun they had, they began taking weekly modern dance lessons and competing in pro/am events. All competitions require the dancers to perform five different dances: foxtrot, waltz, tango, quick step and the Viennese waltz.

Because she and her husband were musical and Barker Schwartz had taken ballet before made learning the exact steps easier.

"I love to dance. It's fantastic putting music and movement together," she said. "I've competed 10 or 11 times and I don't get nervous. I feel like it's just another performance. And we do very well."

The couple recently competed at a New Jersey event and won the pro/am level and got a blue ribbon and a plaque.

For a woman dancer, however, she must have snazzy costumes to wear and use make-up. Men wear tuxes. All that's a far cry from concert attire, which is usually black and musicians as a rule rarely use much makeup.

"I have two gowns: a standard and one called American smooth that is jazzier," she said. "But the makeup is high level. At competitions there are people who will do it for you but you have to pay them."

Because Barker Schwartz often has to perform on her violin, putting aside three or four days, which include a weekend, to compete has limited her participation. But not her husband.

"Dancing has become his hobby," she said. "He goes to competitions with a professional dancer and just came back from Hawaii and he's been to Blackpool Dance Festival in England."

His expertise and the choreography he gets from a coach means Barker Schwartz must stay on top of her skills especially when they hit a crowded dance floor during competitions and someone bumps them.

"He's very cool, very quick. He loves the limelight and he has great floor craft," she said. "The man leads and the woman must catch what's happening. You hope to go with the flow to make everything look like nothing happened and that he gets back on track."

Barker Schwartz credits dancing with one of the reasons she's in such great shape.

"Dancing is very athletic. At one competition, we did 32 dances with 17 of them back to back. That's high energy. I had just enough time to stop, take a breath, and then dance. But it's fun, exciting and it's something different."

The couple are also big-time walkers.

"I'm a fiend," Barker Schwartz said. "We walked last year about 100 miles over a week from the West Coast to the East Coast of England on a tour. It was eight hours a day. I loved it."

She still practices violin as much as ever.

"My musical life is incredibly rich. I wouldn't trade it for anything. Variety doesn't become a grind," she said.

As for her two sons: Erich played oboe but is now an economist; Christoph played trombone and is now at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute studying computer science.

And the next time you go to a musical at Proctors, check in the pit. You might find Barker Schwartz there. "I did 'Anastasia' last year and am doing 'Hello Dolly' this year," she said.