

Classical Notes: Live music rare but well-done

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of
Music from Salem director Lila Brown.
Joseph Dalton



of
Crowd at Music from Salem concert.
Joseph Dalton

The slow and serene melody played by violinist Jay Cosmos Lee wafted out to the audience members who were seated in their lawn chairs and dispersed about on the dry grass of the field. The accompaniment, performed with tender care by pianist Marc Ryser, was a series of simple broken chords. Except for the cooling breezes and lazy sway of the tall trees, time seemed to stand still during the 10 minutes of consoling music by Arvo Part.

This was live music in front of a live audience in rural Washington County on the evening of Tuesday, July 7. The program for combinations of violin, viola and piano was presented by Music from Salem and its director, Lila Brown, the violist who founded the summer series in 1986.

Normally, Music from Salem would be presenting about half a dozen chamber music programs at Hubbard Hall in Cambridge. When the COVID-19 pandemic made that impossible, Brown came up with the notion of some simple outdoor concerts on the 260-acre farm that's been in her family for generations. There are seven more programs scheduled through mid-August. Admission is free, though contributions are welcome.

"We're learning to adapt and be flexible," Brown told the crowd of about 30 adults that night. One audience member exclaimed, "It's like a mini-SPAC," as he and his wife were setting up their chairs. Though the setting was less than ideal for listening, when community, nature and music can come together in the midst of such a troubled world, it seems churlish to complain.

The stage for the event was the open first floor of a vintage barn. That's where Brown and Lee were when the music called only for strings. When the piano was needed, all three players were positioned indoors, in the studio above the garage. Muffled sounds, a kind of ghost music, reached the audience through a few small casement windows that were opened. There's also a large trap door to the upstairs studio, which is how the piano got up there years ago. But the trap door and one of the windows were stuck and unable to be

opened for this first outing. Brown tells me the door and the window are now cooperating and the sound has noticeably improved.

For the piece by Arvo Part (“Spiegel im Spiegel”), the mechanics of the duet are simple enough for it to work with the violinist positioned downstairs and the piano upstairs.

Despite the logistical challenges, it was a generous program with music by Brahms, Bartok, Martinu, d'Indy and Clarke. Brown's goal is to present 45 minutes of lighter and “tasty” music. The specific works for each concert won't be announced until the event.

“We're just trying to think how we can still do live music and keep it really easy for the musicians and safe for everyone,” says Brown. “We have an outdoor toilet if people need, but hopefully they won't. And we're offering a few drive-in places. So if people have to be especially careful, there's room on the edge of the lawn for three or four cars.”

Safety was a priority as Brown put together the roster of artists. The Music from Salem model has been to have a different group of musicians from the U.S. and Europe in residence every week at the farm for a days of practice before taking a program to Hubbard Hall. In warm weather the property can sleep up to 15 people in the main house, the barn and a couple of other little structures, including a chicken coop.

This summer, however, the ensembles are limited to Brown and two guests, three being the number of living quarters with private baths and kitchenettes that's available on the farm.

Also, it's just strings this year. “We're avoiding woodwinds and brass because of danger of spreading germs,” says Brown. In yet another change, most of the performers are from the New York or Boston and all will be arriving by car.

“People ask me if we'll have a livestream,” says Brown. “Everybody else is livestreaming, we're doing live. The stream can be good, better than a recording, but it's not live.”

View the full Music from Salem schedule at musicfromsalem.org.

SET YOUR DIAL TO LOCAL MUSIC

If you've had enough of screens but still want to take in some music with a local connection, don't forget about the good old technology of the radio. Recorded selections of concerts from around the region are regularly part of the programming at WMHT-FM (89.1 FM) in two weekly shows “WMHT Live” (6 p.m. Sundays) and “No Ticket Required” (2 p.m. Fridays).

Since the curtain came down on live concerts, music director Chris Wienk has been making room in the schedule for even more local fare. “We want to help organizations stay in front of their constituents,” he says. The month of May saw the start of “The Albany Symphony Hour” (6 p.m. Fridays) and since then two more programs have been added.

From Maverick Concerts, the unique rustic venue in the forest just outside downtown Woodstock, comes “The Maverick Hour” (5 p.m. Sundays through Sept. 13). Artistic director Alexander Platt curates the show drawing on concert recordings from recent seasons.

Also new to the station is “Inside the Music” (Mondays at 6 p.m.), hosted by Derek Delaney

who is artistic director of Capital Region Classical (formerly Union College Concerts). Each installment will focus on a composer or theme and feature a mix of history and insight from Delaney with performances from the rich history of the series.

Delaney's program is an outgrowth of "Monday Chats," a weekly Zoom discussion group on musical topics that he's been leading since late May. Those sessions will be continuing, with the idea that folks can listen to the 6 p.m. broadcast and then continue the discussion and ask questions via Zoom at 7 p.m. Look for the weekly topics and the Zoom link at: capitalregionclassical.org.

OPERA COMPANY TALKS

Opera companies have jumped readily into the digital realm starting with the Met's daily streaming of past productions that began in the early spring. Our two local troupes haven't gone so far as to offer full productions, but they're doing a lot to present ideas, insights and education.

Opera Saratoga's website (operasaratoga.org) has a bountiful menu of digital programs. There are young artists performing on Facebook, opera trivia contests, and even stuff geared for the littlest audience members, children 6-months to 6-years old. An eight-week course, Opera is a Laughing Matter, sold out but coming up on Aug. 12 is another eight-week class, Great Singers on Singing, taught by the company's artistic and general director Lawrence Edelson. A symposium titled Beethoven's Fidelio is set for Aug. 17-18.

Look for another symposium, Opera and Race, in September.

From Cooperstown comes Glimmerglass Glimpses, a short mix of performances with news and lore about the Glimmerglass Festival. A new installment is released every Thursday.

Also, there's an occasional series of town halls that started on June 18 with a discussion between artistic and general director Francesca Zambello and artistic adviser Eric Owens on the company's response to Black Lives Matter and ongoing efforts at diversity. The next scheduled town hall will feature Sister Helen Prejean, the author of "Dead Man Walking," on Aug. 13.

For some years now, Zambello has been writing a fun and informative e-newsletter called Francesca's Traveling iPad. Arriving roughly once a month, each issue includes some in-depth information on what's happening with the company, also news and sites from the Leatherstocking Region, and glimpses of Zambello's world travels. Usually there's a pic of her dog, Rome, and always a new recipe. It's always a good read, so if you're not already on her list, sign up at Glimmerglass.org.

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