

house music

two local residents host a music festival in their home

by Amy Hegarty

FROM THE MOMENT THEY FIRST ENVISIONED their trilevel Abiquiú House, as their home overlooking the Rio Chama has come to be known, pianist Madeline Williamson and Birgitte Ginge knew that it would be inexorably linked with an event like the Abiquiú Chamber Music Festival, which the two cofounded in 2008. “The house was designed for performance,” says Williamson, who taught for 30 years at Arizona State University before relocating to Abiquiú in 2004. “The main space was built to accommodate a small ensemble. I’ve always told people it was the *Field of Dreams* approach: if you build it, they will come.”

And come they did. “For the festival’s first concert, in the summer of 2008, we expected maybe 30 people to show up. But we had 65 people right away, and that was with hardly any publicity,” Williamson recalls. “Clearly, this festival has made an impact and fills a real need for world-class artists to be available in rural areas like Abiquiú.”

Given that their home is, indeed, in a rural area, during the construction phase Williamson and Ginge were especially committed to making as small an imprint on their surroundings as possible. “This is a very, very green house,” Williamson says. “It was created out of SIPs [structural insulated panels] and has ash-concrete passive solar floors. It’s been plumbed and wired for both solar and photovoltaic systems, but we haven’t added those because, due to the design of the house, we use

very little electricity. There’s also radiant heat throughout, but in the winters we mostly rely on our highly efficient Danish woodstove.”

Part of the success of the festival in addition to the top-notch talent it presents has been due to the fact that the venue underscores one of the main reasons audiences and musicians are drawn to chamber music in general: intimacy. In Abiquiú, the scaled-down level of musical forces is matched by Williamson and Ginge’s scaled-down lifestyle. “Our only criteria when talking with Mark and Peter Anderson, our architects, were: no inner walls, no closets, and as few doors as possible,” Williamson says. “We have a front door to the house and pocket doors on the lavatories, but everything else is open. With regard to the furniture, neither Birgitte nor I have ever owned a couch. We have a philosophy that everything must be portable, which means that what we have in the house is easily rearranged for concert needs.”

The festival’s concerts are held on the home’s main floor, a loft-like space with 14-foot ceilings. Most of the guests are seated outdoors, on the steel decks that flank the north and south side of the home. “Our intention was that this would be an outdoor festival, in order to take advantage of the river location and natural surroundings,” Williamson says. “The south deck is covered and seats 20 people. The north deck is uncovered (although we do have umbrellas) and can hold up to 50. If someone has special needs, they can let us know and we will seat them indoors.”



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This page: Abiquiú House, which overlooks the Rio Chama; opposite: Madeline Williamson (at piano) and guests applaud a performance by soprano Pam Unger at the Abiquiú Chamber Music Festival.

Williamson notes that one of the risks inherent in hosting an outdoor festival is, of course, the possibility of bad weather. “In Abiquiú, storms occur in the late afternoon in the summertime, which is why we start our concerts at 2 P.M. We’ve had rain in the past, but we’ve never been rained out, since the storms don’t last long. People can move indoors, but sometimes they choose to stay outside and get drenched. They say that’s precisely what they love about the festival—it’s so natural!”

The concerts run each year from mid-June to mid-August and feature repertoire that ranges from classic to contemporary. This season’s artist lineup includes cellist Sally Guenther; pianists Robert McDonald, Hamilton Tescarollo, Shields-Collins Bray, and Jacquelyn Helin; classical guitarist David Leisner; mezzo-soprano Virginia Dupuy; and violist John Graham, who will perform new works for viola and electronics in addition to pieces for viola and piano with Williamson.

New works are a key part of the festival’s agenda. Last season Native American flutist R. Carlos Nakai gave the world premiere of the organization’s first commission, Ruth Lomon’s *ReWeaving(s)*. That piece inspired two companion commissions of sorts: *Abiquiú Blanket*, by multimedia artist Mary Hamill, and *Abiquiú Carpet*, an outdoor sculpture by Hamill’s son, Andrew. “Mary came to New Mexico and did all of the weaving here in town,” says Williamson. “When she finished, the blanket was hung on the right wall of the entryway so that guests of the festival could see it when they walked in. It really created an environment for the music. The blanket seemed to envelop you in a different kind of space.” After seeing the work his mother had done, Andrew Hamill told Williamson that he also wanted to contribute to the festival. As a result, he created *Abiquiú Carpet*, a woven-steel sculpture with four mirrors on it. The views from the mirrors—the sky, the river, the greenery—change depending on where the sculpture is displayed. Williamson notes that *Abiquiú Blanket* and *Carpet* are good examples of how projects develop

at the festival. “They evolve out of one idea and then become something else. I think because it’s only two of us (Birgitte and me) working on the festival, the artistic direction can really flow. Being interdisciplinary and having connections with people and other artists is very important.”

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With regard to the future of the Abiquiú Chamber Music Festival, two pivotal events occurred in recent months. “Last summer we finished a process with the Rio Arriba County Commissioners that allowed the festival to become an official arts entity of the county, which is very significant. It enables us to continue to provide a real service to our community,” Williamson says. “Another thing that happened is that we became an affiliate of the local nonprofit Luciente Inc., which means that we can now start to work on the education-outreach part of our mission.”

While these recent developments will lead to new adventures down the road, Williamson maintains that certain things will always stay the same. “We don’t plan to ever have more than six concerts, and we don’t plan to ever have non-summer concerts. The festival’s been designed to take advantage of our beautiful surroundings, with people sitting on decks overhanging the Rio Chama,” she says. “The whole experience is enchanting. Both the audience and the musicians want to come back each year because they feel that this is the way chamber music is meant to be performed and experienced.” ■

