
FEATURES | OCT. 2023

IN PERFECT HARMONY

By Mitch Hurst

Black Oak Ensemble, an internationally known trio, features violinist Desirée Ruhstrat, cellist David Cunliffe, and violist Aurélien Fort Pederzoli.

As 2019 rolled into 2020, members of the Lake Forest Symphony became increasingly aware that the symphony was likely to disband due to fundraising challenges and the onset of COVID-19. Indeed, the day before Governor JB Pritzker ordered Illinois residents to stay at home, the symphony closed its doors.

That's when Deb Stevenson and a few other symphony members—with time now on their hands—began ruminating about ways to fill the void left by the Lake Forest Symphony's absence. The result was the founding of Rendezvous Arts, a group of artists and musicians who not only are continuing the strong tradition of professional chamber music in Lake Forest but doing so in a new and visceral way.

"While it was looking like the orchestra was going to fold, we had a very successful full chamber music series, and I kept asking board members and people involved with the orchestra if they thought we could at least find a way to keep chamber music alive in Lake Forest," Stevenson says.

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The Christian Dillingham Quartet is led by Grammy Award-winning Chicago bass legend Christian Dillingham.

One of the first moves she made was to call the Gorton Center, which expressed a strong interest in partnering with Rendezvous. Within six weeks the nonprofit organization had a board, two venues in which to perform, including the Gorton Center, and seven concerts booked.

This year's Rendezvous Arts season runs from October to April and will include seven concerts by diverse groups of musicians, from traditional Irish instruments to jazz to string quartets, plus a guitar duo.

"People ask, 'How is this chamber music?' The true definition of chamber music is 13 or fewer players all of whom have their own individual parts," says Stevenson. "We had a jazz group in our second season and the next month a 1700s-period instrument ensemble. We're just showing people there's a way to love all chamber music. It doesn't have to be just one specific kind."

And Rendezvous Arts is not just about music. It's also about how different types of art can be paired together to create an even more sensory experience for the audience. Each music group in this year's lineup is paired with a visual artist, from painters to fiber artists to potters.

"The idea is that there's something for everyone because chamber music isn't supposed to be stuffy and boring, it's supposed to be fun and interactive," she says. "That's what we're doing. I like to tell people it really took off the first time we had a harpsichord and people realized they could go look in the harpsichord and see how it worked and learn about it."

It is this type of interaction with audiences that makes Rendezvous Arts a perfect fit for the Gorton Center (Rendezvous also stages performances at Artifacts Events in

Chicago and Stage Left Theatre in Dixon, Illinois). The smaller performance space provides an intimacy with the audience that just can't be found in more traditional concert halls.

"It's always bothered me that at the end of the concert, the audience goes out the front door and the orchestra goes out the back door and we never meet," she explains. "Now we get to meet and get to know each other."

The KAIA String Quartet is a high energy group of musicians dedicated to promoting the rich and colorful music of Latin America.

Stevenson says the values baked into Rendezvous' DNA are featuring first-class talent, including full-time, professional musicians, and musicians and artists that fit the vibe and atmosphere of what the organization is trying to do, including a willingness to interact with the audience.

"Most chamber music in its beginning was written for parties. It wasn't written to be on a concert stage," she says. "We just want it to be more intimate. At the Gorton Center in Lake Forest, we're not on the big stage where Lake Forest Symphony used to perform. We're in the smaller Stewart Room. It's almost like you're going to a concert in a living room, and I love that. Plus, you can walk in and out and get a drink."

This year's Rendezvous lineup features the well-known guitar duo Fareed Haque and Goran Ivanovic; woodwind specialists Band of Five (Plus 4!); an Irish Christmas performance by fiddler Katie Grennan and accordionist John Williams (who happen to be newlyweds); the Christian Dillingham Jazz Quartet; Black Tulip Period Instrument Ensemble; the internationally acclaimed Black Oak Ensemble; and the Kaia String Quartet.

Uruguayan native Victoria Moreira is one of two violinists in the KAIA String Quartet, an ensemble that regularly features music by composers from Latin America. Moreira knew of Stevenson, and they had even played together at some point but had never really spoken. When Stevenson dialed her up to find out if KAIA would be interested in working with Rendezvous, Moreira was elated.

"It was actually really nice chatting with her and just from the conversation we realized we have so much in common. A lot of her interests are very similar to mine regarding music," Moreira says. "I was particularly excited to have the quartet playing in her festival because of her mission and she really was excited about our Latin American repertoire."

Moreira says she also liked the idea of partnering with an artist and making artwork a part of KAIA's performances. Stevenson suggested the Chicago-based painter Ken Reif, known for his vibrant paintings of trees and other outdoors landscapes. It's a good match.

"I was looking at his artwork and I just thought she did a really good job with pairing us up with him. One of the things he writes about his work is that he thinks of his work as renewable energy," adds Moreira. "That really resonated with me because that's how I feel when we play the repertory that we do.

Guitarists Fareed Haque and Goran Ivanovic will open the 2023-2024 Rendezvous Arts season with a performance at the Gorton Center on October 29.

She grew up in Uruguay on tango music—her father is also a musician—and the KAIA Quartet's performance on April 27 at the Gorton Center will feature tango-infused works by composers from Mexico, Brazil, and Cuba. She and her fellow musicians in the quartet, Naomi Culp, Susan Bengtson Price, and Hope De- Celle, make it a point to elevate Latin composers who don't get a lot of attention in the U.S.

"We have a couple that we are doing this year and we haven't finalized the pieces, but we're trying to represent different parts of Latin America," she says.

Longtime Lake Forest resident and classical music enthusiast Megan Morris says Rendezvous Arts brings a fresh perspective and approach to presenting classical music on the North Shore, especially given its local partnerships.

"I think a lot of people in our community have a real soft spot for Gorton in general and the fact that Rendezvous Arts has partnered with Gorton is a win, win for me," Morris says. "That's a really important piece of the puzzle for me personally. If Rendezvous Arts were in Highland Park or in Deerfield or another community, I would probably still go, but it's really juicy for me that it's local."

To have a group of musicians like Rendezvous Arts, Morris says, contributes so much to both the Gorton Center and the community. She says having a dynamic leader such as Stevenson has upped the excitement for classical and chamber music in Lake Forest.

"I thought it was really cool how she created a venue not only for the musicians but then brought artists and their artwork to kind of tie in a theme," says Morris. "So that just adds another depth to the experience."

And while there are other options to see and hear live music on the North Shore, such as Ravinia during the summer, Morris says having a place in the heart of Lake Forest to experience highquality classical music makes Rendezvous Arts unique.

“The fact that we can pop into Gorton and have that level of music for an hour or two makes it so easy,” she says. “To have so many different groups and musicians I think is amazing.”

For more information about Rendezvous Arts, see a schedule of performances, and purchase tickets, visit rendezvousarts.org.

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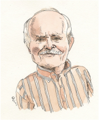

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