

Two roads diverged

Marie Williams melds music and architecture

By Sara Poirier
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It was while recovering from foot surgery that Marie Van Vorst Williams first began her love affair with an Italian architect who'd been dead for nearly 420 years.

The man's name was Andrea Palladio, an influential figure in the history of Western architecture. Mr. Palladio's designs were based on mathematical proportions and classical Roman principles, in similar style to that of the Early and High Renaissance. Ms. Williams read about him in an article about Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, the design for which was influenced, it said, by the famed 16th Century figure.

Today, Mr. Palladio's legacy lives on, not just in his buildings still in existence around the world, but right here in Greenwich.

Palladium Musicum is a nonprofit organization that is "devoted to celebrating classical music internationally as an expression of culture, the arts and the sacred, experienced in an intimate setting." Ms. Williams, a 25-year Greenwich resident, started the group out of her home almost two years ago.

"It really is to my way of thinking, wedding architecture and music and the values of the Renaissance in a very unique way," she said. "We're trying to go back sort of to the core values on which our culture and heritage are based."

A stockbroker by day, Ms. Williams recently admitted to the *Post* that she has always been a fan of architecture and music and loves to do research on the different topics and themes that comprise Palladium Musicum's programs.

"Palladio's architecture is what I call frozen music," she said. "It's a way of expressing, I think, the Western ideals and values that he was trying to instill with architecture being part of the landscape, part of the culture, part of the life of his period in time and an expression of the values."

"Architecture is part of it, but everything else feeds into it."

Palladium Musicum hosts two programs and a benefit each year in the United States, and a festival abroad. The events combine lecturers, musicians and food from the time periods being discussed, and integrates things such as music with the visual arts, the sacred, literature, poetry, architecture and gardens.

"It's really a total experience," Ms.

Williams said of her group's events, where the audience is able to meet with performers and speakers, as well as each other, to discuss what they've learned and seen.

While last year the group traveled to Surrey, England, to celebrate Mr. Palladio, this year's festival will be from June 30 to July 7 at Sant' Antonio, Tivoli, a former monastery just outside of Rome, Italy. The organization's January and April programs covered "The Influence of the Architecture of Ancient Rome on Andrea Palladio and An Evening of Brass Instrumental Music" and "Landscape Architecture Shaping the City of Rome and An Evening of Italian Renaissance Music for Small Vocal Ensembles." The annual benefit, Ms. Williams said, will be in the fall this year.

Next year will mark the 500th anniversary of Mr. Palladio's birth, and for it, Ms. Williams said Palladium Musicum is planning to celebrate big.

"We're going to try to do the best for [Mr.] Palladio as we can in our modest way," she said, adding that she hopes to have a week-long festival stateside, as well as a mini-festival at Drayton Hall in Charleston, S.C., the oldest surviving example of Georgian Palladian architecture in the U.S.

The group's festival abroad next year will be at the Villa Saraceno, one of Mr. Palladio's works outside Venice, Italy.

"It really is bringing together the world of music and the arts and architecture and gardens and landscape designs in a renaissance tradition," Ms. Williams said, adding that a goal of Palladium Musicum is to bring in young, developing musicians to perform.

"I'm at a stage in my life and career where I really want to give back," she said. "[I want to] try to give them an opportunity to step back from the career pressures and do some things which are kind of fun and give them a chance to express themselves."

"Knowing the pressures on young musicians and the values of our society and where the big money goes... the big money is not going to music. The big money is not necessarily going to the arts. It's not



Marie Van Vorst Williams founded Palladium Musicum after falling in love with the work of architect Andrea Palladio, one of the most influential figures in the history of Western architecture. — Sara Poirier photo

going to culture or to specialized, precious things.

"I think we're kind of unique and I think, you know, in the very competitive world of the arts, we're probably a very small fish in a very large pond, but my feeling is we want to do quality programs the best we can make them, we want to keep it intimate so it really has the feeling of a Renaissance experience."

Maintaining that experience is where Ms. Williams said she could use some help. As a start-up organization, she said she has personally put in close to 50% of the funding. This year, Ms. Williams and her board of directors set up a formal membership program through which she said she hopes to attract individuals, corporations and foundations.

Even schools have taken part in the Palladium Musicum experience, with a Brunswick School and Greenwich Academy teacher bringing his students to

an event.

"I think that's part of what you need to get something small going, is attracting a wider and wider range of people," Ms. Williams said.

Named after a nunnery in Venice that Mr. Palladio started but never finished, the Carità Scholarship Fund was also set up this year to underwrite the expenses of the young musicians who perform at the festivals.

Saraceno sponsors may also underwrite a specific event or contribute to underwriting the expenses of bringing a musical group or lecturer to a Palladium Musicum event.

Tickets for individual events are \$65 each, but anyone may become a member of the organization at varying monetary levels.

"I have to believe it will find its way because it's different," Ms. Williams said of Palladium Musicum. "It also challenges people."

"I think everybody needs to have a bread and butter job," she added of her 9-to-5. "As the men in the office like to call what I do, they say, 'Well, that's your golf.'"

"When I may retire or semi-retire, this is what I shall continue doing."

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Palladium Musicum combines the arts in way that harkens back to the Renaissance, blending music and architecture with other forms of creativity to create diverse programs for all ages.