

Pianist's weekly recitals reward early risers

By Carter Smith

It's barely 8 a.m. on a late-fall Sunday and a crowd of about 25 hardy souls is already seated in the sanctuary of The First Unitarian Society of Westchester (FUSW) in Hastings, listening intently not to an early-morning sermon but to the genius of composer Robert Schumann. At the piano is life-long Hastings resident Alan Murray whose performance is his 10th in the Sunrise Music Series launched in mid-September — with a Chopin cycle — and scheduled to end in mid-June (2011).

His recitals, some 44 total, are hosted by the Society with the intention of providing both members of the congregation and visitors from the community alike an hour of quality weekly listening in a contemplative setting, surrounded by the natural beauty visible from the sanctuary room on Old Jackson Avenue.

In addition to the morning sessions, Murray will perform eight afternoon Beethoven programs, from March through early May.

Asked what inspired the Sunrise Series, Murray, who is a financial analyst by trade, said, "The idea arose from my desire to bring music that I had learned at one time or another to performance-quality level, and to find a venue that would be ideal for performing — in a relatively informal setting — a large cross-section of the piano repertoire, free of cost and open to the public. The time slot and the venue seemed ideally suited."

The time slot and venue are ideal — Murray already handles music for the Society's 9:30 a.m. Sunday services. While the audience usually numbers between 20 and 25 people, it continues to gradually expand.

Murray graduated from Hastings High School in 1980 and then attended Cornell, where he received a degree in physics and languages — and also received the universi-



TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Alan Murray plays the piano during a recent Sunrise Music Series performance at the First Unitarian Society.

ty's award for distinguished piano soloist.

"The piano is but one instrument, and is not better than any other in an absolute sense," Murray said, "but the piano is unique in being effectively an 'orchestra-in-a-box,' giving it the ability to support an almost infinite and kaleidoscopic array of textures and colors, multiple simultaneous voices, and harmonics from the simplest to the incredibly complex and subtle. Most great works for the instrument can be deconstructed into the instruments of the orchestra — Schumann's music, for example, is extremely orchestral — and I find this a valuable exercise, and one that greatly helps to elucidate the nature of a piece of music, to imbue it with added dimension."

Murray's selections for the Series make up the core of the classical, romantic, and early

20th-century repertoire for the piano. While acknowledging that each musician has his or her favorites, he said "most of the 18 composers represented are, by virtually any standard, in the pantheon of great composers for the piano. In particular, the Series encompasses all or near all of the piano music of Chopin, Schumann, Debussy and Ravel, as well as the cycle of Beethoven's 32 Piano Sonatas and Diabelli Variations and the masterpieces of Albéniz, Granados, Rachmaninoff, sonatas and variations of Brahms and Schubert, and the major works of Franz Liszt. Add in some major works of Scriabin, Prokofiev, Stravinsky and a few others, and this pretty well constitutes my favorite music for the instrument."

Potluck brings faiths together at FUSW

In the light of recent hostility towards Muslims in America, the First Unitarian Society of Westchester (FUSW) hosted a potluck dinner for the Upper Westchester Muslim Society at the FUSW in Hastings.

The lively crowd of about 80 attendees met over a wide assortment of food and refreshments followed by guided discussion at each table. Attendees described their religions and explained their underlying values and truths as part of an effort to become better acquainted.

Sarita Roy, the FUSW chair for the event, said, "It has been beautiful to see our two communities coming together, learning about one another, and appreciating those things we have in common as well as our differences. We are committed to get to know each other."

Her counterpart, Nada Khalifeh, declared that she was moved by Sarita's warm invitation and then added, "The Koran says 'We created you from male and female and rendered you nations and tribes that you may know each other. The most honorable of you in the sight of God is the most pious.'"

Diane Guernsey started the evening with piano selections and also finished the evening with the song "Peace, Salam, Shalom." An ecumenical blessing was given by the Rev. Jef Gambler.

FUSW's president, April Castoldi, stated, "I am thrilled and delighted at the opportunity to build community and to recognize our commonality and unique differences. It was like old friends meeting tonight."

Murray

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Murray's roots in the Rivertowns — and at FUSW — run deep. His parents, John and Ruth, became members of what was then known as The First Unitarian Church of Westchester in 1962, when it was located on South Broadway in Yonkers. Ruth Murray passed away in 2004, but her husband remains an active member of the congregation.

"I went to the [church] nursery school when it was on Broadway, near Getty Square," the younger Murray said. "That was the last I saw of it for many years. But once the opportunity to provide the music at the early services at FUSW arose, I've been back ever since."

Murray's first lessons, when he was about 11, were with Frances Sikerzycki Wazeter of Hastings. "Her son, John, is a regular attendee at the Sunrise programs," Murray noted. "She

was of Polish background, and introduced me to Chopin." After three years studying with her, in 1976 Murray continued with Allen Weiss of Ardsley. Murray remembers that for many years Weiss hosted an "Artists in Concert" series on radio station WQXR. It was held at midnight. "I guess any time is good for an hour of good music," he laughed. Weiss passed away last year, and the Sunrise Music Series is dedicated in part to him.

In addition to Murray's successful career with Moody's Investors Service's Financial Institutions Group, in which he focuses on worldwide developing markets and oversees a team in Latin America in Moody's offices in Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico, he co-owns Galapagos Books in Hastings with his wife, Amada Abad. Their 14-year-old daughter, Celia, is a student at Hastings High School.

Murray and Abad first met at the bookstore, where Abad has worked since it opened in 1986. When the original owner, Susan Lindsay, decided to sell the business in 1997, Murray and Abad purchased it, and she took over the day-to-day operations.

"I went in one day to buy a book... and look what happened," Murray said. "The book was Mario Vargas Llosa's 'Conversations in the Cathedral,' in Spanish. Amada was impressed — it was the thickest book in the store. But to this day I still haven't read it!"

Murray sees the Sunrise Concert Series as a new way to connect with the community he grew up in. "The combination of having the privilege to offer this series with the many pleasures of having Galapagos Books — and Amada is the one who gets the credit for keeping that thriving — make the experience of living in the Rivertowns especially rewarding," he said. "Between these two activities, meeting and getting to know many people from the community, all with their own talents and interests and enthusiasm for the arts in its many forms, make it all especially satisfying."

Asked what he plans next in his busy schedule, Murray remarked that "For now, all of my energy is going into preparation for this series, so time to think beyond it is something of a luxury. The repertoire involved is enough for a full pianistic career, all packed

into nine months, so the effort is fairly intensive. The next steps, however, will likely begin next fall with a repeat of this series at my home studio, open to the public, to be recorded for CD release."

Murray is hoping to find room in future series for some of the greats not on the current schedule, such as Scarlatti, Bach, Mozart, and Haydn, among others. Murray also recently received an informal invitation to play the Chopin cycle in Warsaw, Poland, sometime next year. Over the longer term, Murray hopes to perform at colleges, universities, and smaller concert venues, and he is also interested in taking on a few students, to return to chamber music, and to maybe even start or join a small jazz, salsa, tango or bossa nova group.

"Beyond that... we'll see," he said. Perhaps he might even pick up that Vargas Llosa book.

For more information about the Sunrise Music Series, visit Alan Murray's Web site: www.studio-hollywood.com