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TIM LAMORTE/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Pianist Alan Murray with choir director Christine Free Rhodeback, violinist Robert Plotkin, violinist Joshua Daniels, violinist Kate Ashby, and cellist Sachi Patitucci

Orchestra to debut with Mozart and more

By Patricia Robert

Westchester Chamber Soloists, a newly formed ensemble orchestra founded by pianist Alan Murray of Hastings, will give its inaugural performance at Reisinger Concert Hall on the campus of Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville this Sunday, March 8, at 1 p.m.

The program will offer four pieces that feature solo performances: Mozart's "Overture to the Magic Flute" and "Piano Concerto No. 1"; Aaron Copland's "Quiet City"; and Beethoven's "Choral Fantasia." The soloists will be Murray, John Reid on trumpet, and Dorothy

Darlington on English Horn.

The Sarah Lawrence Choir, directed by Christine Free Rhodeback of Hastings, will sing in the "Choral Fantasia" with guest vocalists Yolanda F. Johnson and Nell MacDonald.

The WCS is an orchestra whose 34 members include accomplished professional musicians as well as amateurs with other careers. The ensemble also

includes music teachers and faculty members from the RiverArts Music Program, the Hackley School and the Hoff-Barthelson Music School. Membership is by invitation and the musicians unpaid.

Murray worked in global finance for more than 30 years after graduating

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from Cornell with a bachelor's degree in science and languages. He has performed solo concerts at the First Unitarian Society of Westchester in Hastings and on the RiverArts Music Tour.

"The thought for this project came to me totally unplanned last October," Murray said. "I had taken a year off from my job so that I could travel for a bit — to Russia, China, and other places — and play music. I had also had a portion of the house enlarged so that I could have a studio. One night, after hearing a performance of a Mozart concerto — the most beautiful sound — I found I couldn't sleep. So I got up and went into the studio. As I looked around, cup of tea in hand, I saw all this space in front of me and wondered how it would look filled with a little orchestra.

"That thought led me to think of all the talented, experienced musicians I know, many who are affiliated with prestigious institutions," he continued. "But the opportunities to perform as a soloist are few and far between. So I began to think of an orchestra filled with soloists."

By November he had the answer to the question he had asked himself that night in his studio — yes, musicians in the area would join his new venture.

Murray developed a business plan and he sought advice about programming from Dobbs Ferry resident Calvin Wiersma, a violinist who has toured the world as a chamber musician and soloist.

"Calvin knew so much more than I did about chamber music pieces that include a solo by an instrumentalist and was enormously helpful," Murray said. "The 'business plan' was just a detailed

proposal regarding membership, proposed rehearsal times and performances, and repertoire. The only aspect that has really evolved somewhat differently than initially proposed is that we are already presenting a much more varied repertoire, as the original proposal was more Mozart-centric.

"As for the budget, the idea was to have a very low-budget operation," Murray continued. "I was hoping that players would be energized by the unique opportunity [chamber orchestra, perform as soloists, cooperative venture] and that ticket sales would be sufficient to cover our otherwise fairly modest baseline expenses."

The plan is for the group not to become dependent on contributions, but Murray welcomes donations from those who want to support the initiative. Levels of sponsorship and corresponding perks are spelled out on WCS's website.

WCS is an orchestra without a conductor. Rather, there will be a "concert master." Violinist April Johnson of Hastings will fill that position this weekend. A graduate of Oberlin Conservatory, Johnson studied with Itzhak Perlman and was a founding member of the Galatea Ensemble.

"It's really special for me, but it is a rotating seat so there will be others," Johnson said. "It is not a one-person show with a conductor who we are blindly following. My guidance will be through body language — a bobbing head to indicate the tempo or a raised bow as a signal to start, for example. It is more of a collaborative effort where we are working together as a team."

This format appeals to violinist Kate Ashby of Hastings. Now in management with Primo Artists, Ashby was formerly

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the music program director for RiverArts. She is the director of artistic development for WCS. Ashby has a B.A. in dance and music from the University of Kent in Canterbury, England. She has performed with the Yonkers Philharmonic and at chamber music concerts in the area.

"Each instrument has its own voice and we become closely attuned to how these voices intersect," Ashby said. "The close group dynamic is very exciting."

Sachi Patitucci, principal cellist, is pleased that the premiere performance will allow her to play alongside her husband, John, the renowned bass player. He will be a guest artist for WCS's debut. The two have been busy, but on different projects. She performed on the

soundtrack for the film "Gemini Man," while he has been working with the New York Philharmonic on the jazz section of Stephen Spielberg's remake of "West Side Story." Sachi Patitucci has a B.A. in music from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester.

"Before we had children, I used to tour with John all the time, so I was delighted that WCS needed a bass and he was available," she said. "It is so exciting, as WCS serves a need to bring chamber music — complete with an orchestra that has woodwinds and brass — to this part of the country, especially Westchester. Playing without a conductor can be a messy process, but very rewarding when it all comes together, and WCS has a really good esprit de corps."

Tickets cost \$25 for general admission, \$10 for students. Tickets are available at the door and online. For more information, visit www.WestchesterChamberSoloists.com.