

The Passion You May Not Know You Already Have

Go once, to just one concert. You will come away moved, connected ...and feeling better about life than you imagined you could. The music fills spaces you didn't know were empty, spaces you may not have known existed. And guaranteed, you'll want to go back.

And when I tell you it's Brahms, Bach, Mozart and all the rest who will do this for you, do not run for the hills, not when it's New Canaan High School Class of '92 sports dude turned internationally-touring piano virtuoso Andrew Armstrong bringing it to you and our entire area through New Canaan Chamber Music (NCCM).

NCCM convenes world-class musicians—most of whom require trips to New York City to hear—to play a combination of comfortable classics and mind-stretching newer pieces to an audience that comes from all over for the concerts. They're intimate, personal and each features a different mix of instruments and musicians. Often the programs are a world premiere, and the only occasion in which that particular line up of music and musicians will ever appear.

Andy (as he will quickly tell you to call him—devoid as he is of all presumption), is the founder, music director and champion in chief of NCCM. While it could not/would not exist without its dedicated Board of Directors (as Andy is swift to say), it is he who



BENJAMIN EALOVEGA

*Andrew Armstrong,
founder, music
director and
champion in chief
of New Canaan
Chamber Music*

Art Show



Armstrong performing with guest artists at a New Canaan Chamber Music concert

taps his deep network to line up the musicians and set the programs and the tone for the concerts, serving as emcee as well as a featured performer.

“Before each piece, Andy addresses the audience with unbridled joy and provides his insights into the music and the composer, which makes classical music accessible to novices, like me,” explained Board Member Susan Gelvin, a NCHS classmate who was not a fan of classical music growing up.

Andy started NCCM in 2020 as a way to give back to the area that gave him his start when he persuaded musicians sidelined by COVID to perform an outdoor concert at First Presbyterian Church in New Canaan. Since then, it has grown to include six concerts December through May. Indoors now, they remain at First Presbyterian (which has among the best acoustics around). There are evening and matinee performances of each program along with family concerts, and outreach performances at schools, senior centers and Boys and Girls Clubs throughout Fairfield County.

“Our outreach has been part of our mission from day one,” said Board Member Tracey Karl who has known Andy since his earliest days at the piano.

“The music is precious and magical. It would be wrong not to share it with communities who don’t have easy access to our concerts,” added Board Chair Tom Butterworth who also watched Andy grow up.

NCCM is part of Armstrong’s dream to “shake souls” through classical music as his was when he was 12 years old and traded his cleats for six hours and more of daily piano practice.

He’d been studying piano for five years in New Canaan, a reluctant practitioner at best. But he loved the Chopin noc-



Armstrong after outreach performances: LEFT: at a local senior center, Right: at a Boys and Girls Club

turnes his dad played endlessly, “melting cassette tapes,” according to Andy, on family road trips to Michigan to visit his grandparents.

But then...

“I had my first crush on a girl from summer camp the same year my father put on a cassette tape of (Arthur) Rubenstein playing Chopin’s *First Ballade*,” recalled Andy, laughing at the memory. “It was a diabolical cocktail and my heart just exploded out of my chest. I suddenly had this piercing, singular focus that all I wanted to do with my life was to make one person feel when I played the piano the way Rubenstein made me feel when he played the piano,” he added more seriously.

By any measure, he’s made a countless many feel precisely this in a career that cut short his studies at Columbia University. He spent nearly four years there, balancing a

touring schedule with studying Shakespeare, before touring took over completely.

“In high school, I heard rumblings about Andy being a piano prodigy, but I never really saw that side of him. He was smart, likable, outgoing and athletic—a regular teenager and very unassuming,” said Susan. “I became aware that he was a generational talent when he won an award at the Van Cliburn International Competition in 1993,” she continued.

“In his *Republic*, Plato describes the ideal education of young people and absolutely, (sports) factored very prominently in his idea of children being brought up the right way. But also there was poetry and composition and music and dance and acting. And I think it’s at our peril that we lose any of those balances,” said Andy, a father of three himself in Worcester, MA where he lives with his wife Esty while not touring.

But it’s not just this balance he’s after with NCCM.

“I think the reason music shook my soul when I was 12 is that it connects the spirits of human beings at such a different level from anything else that I’ve discovered,” explained Andy. “Leonard Bernstein said that music is the most powerful human language and the least specific. And I think

that’s one thing that makes it maybe a more urgent art form now than ever,” he continued, “because (it gives us a way) to share from spirit to spirit in a vulnerable, honest, passionate way but without the specifics and the buzz words that suck us all into these vortexes, playing us out to the edges of these centrifuges that are so toxic,” he added.

He works hard to do cultivate this connection, using every ounce of his talent, warmth, humor and authenticity to dispel the ivory tower nature that can make classical music seem hieroglyphic to the uninitiated. It is, after all, far more familiar than you might think. It’s the basis of nearly every musical genre.

“I remember observing early on, ‘Holy smokes, classical composers do everything that I love in great Zeppelin or Pink Floyd but they do it more often and more powerfully,’” said Andy who, through his older brothers, was raised on “Zep, Floyd, the Beatles and Yes, a lot of Yes.”

“Great music makes everything better,” observed Tom.

Especially great classical music.

For concert tickets and more information about NCCM and the 2024 Season including the upcoming January 25th and 26th performances, visit newcanaanchambermusic.org.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY CORINNE PARKER AND NEW CANAAN CHAMBER MUSIC

