

Musical Time Machine

THE POST-STANDARD / NEIGHBORS WEST

Thursday, July 31, 2008

"It's like their souls are part of the instruments....
You can feel them being united."

NEWS

GONNA PARTY LIKE ...it's 1499?

The Bells & Motley Consort keeps
connected to music from days of olde

By Carrie Chantler
Contributing writer

The past and the present converged the evening of July 24 at the Marcellus Free Library. Upstairs, in the Friends of the Library Community Room, extra chairs had to be found to seat the crowd that filled the 1,500-square-foot space to attend an interactive discussion, slide show and free concert held and performed by Bells & Motley Consort.

John and Sondra Bromka, of Marcellus, are musicians and artisans who make their home and musical workshop in Marcellus. They've been married 28 years. They are the musicians who comprise Bells & Motley Consort.

The Bromkas met the day after St. Patrick's Day in Thornden Park on the Syracuse University campus. She was taking a break from working on a sculpture of Orpheus and decided to play an Irish penny whistle in the park. He was in the park and followed the sound of the whistle. They began a chat that has lasted all these years.

There was a perfect match, Sondra Bromka said, because John was a musician who wanted to find out more about art, and she was an artist who wanted to learn more about music.

In the process, couple has combined their love and admiration of medieval music, historical research, travel and performance into an interactive, intergenerational photography and live music exhibit.

"We feel extremely privileged to have gained so much knowledge and understanding from photo documentaries like this in our own travels in Europe," said Sondra.

On the main floor of the library, an exhibit of 40 photographs grace four walls.

The photographs feature images of bagpipes, drums, lutes, early fiddles and more, and were taken during research pilgrimages across Europe. Once a year since 1991, the Bromkas have traveled overseas to study art at museums and to tour cathedrals and towns looking for architectural images of obscure instruments. They also have held teaching residencies at the International School of Brussels and at various high schools in Turkey, as well as across the U.S.

In a multimedia presentation before a group of about 45 people, the Bromkas, dressed in regalia reminiscent of the Middle Ages, moved from discussing music iconography in the artwork of such masters as Bosch and Brueghel and playing a number of unique instruments to conducting a sing-a-long.

Following the theme of the reading program that the library is sponsoring this summer, "Catch the Reading Bug," the impromptu sing-a-long, in just-learned Italian, was about a cricket that incites a love interest to imbibe in a cocktail. John played a cittern (a cousin of the guitar) and Sondra the castanets.

"Aren't you glorious," said Sondra to the singers in the audience. Her eyes playful and her face flushed from dancing around John, she teased him with her clicking hand cymbals. "It's just like we're in Flanders and it's 1492."

Around the perimeter of the room, on tables, were displayed several sizes of harps, hurdy-gurdies, horns (made from actual horns), medieval fiddles, drums, lutes, zithers and rommelpots. A rommelpot is a bowl with an animal skin stretched over it and a stick protruding from the center that's pulled in and out. To be played correctly, the musician's



SONDRA BROMKA PLAYS a drum and her husband, John, plays a stringed Irish cittern during a performance and lecture June 24 at Marcellus Free Library. The couple tours Europe annually to learn about art, culture and especially musical instruments of days-gone-by.



THE BELLS & MOTLEY Consort — Sondra and John Bromka — perform on reproductions of Renaissance-era musical instruments at the Marcellus library. Sondra is playing a Mediterranean predecessor to the oboe called a shawm; John is playing a stringed cittern he built.

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Bells & Motley keep the sounds of antique music alive

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hand has to be wet. What sort of sound does this odd instrument make? The answer: a tuba-like moan.

"We're not intending to sound pretty necessarily. That's not our job," said Sondra.

Rather, the aim of the evening was to integrate the analysis of artistic images from the past into a community discussion about today's cultural identity.

For instance, the bagpipe is most commonly associated with

Scotland. The bagpipe is a wind instrument that requires a reed, much like the modern-day clarinet, oboe or bassoon. Reeds grow in warm water, which is scarcely found in the Scottish Highlands. Therefore, the bagpipe, the Bromka's imply, most likely originated where the reed plant grows easily, in the warmer climates of the Mediterranean.

"One of the comments we hear most after presenting exhibits such as this is, 'I'll never look at art the same way, we take our time with it,'" Sondra said.

Between playing and discussing art, the duo answered questions from the audience. After viewing a slide of a woman playing a hammered dulcimer, a young teenager asked how such a large downward instrument stayed attached to the woman, especially if the idea was to parade around villages playing it. (The answer was that it was attached by belt to her waist.)

During a brief discussion of animal fiber and skin and how they are transformed into important parts of instruments, a man raised his hand and asked if the sinew from the spinal column of a deer had ever been used to make the strings of a lute or zither. John Bromka stroked his white beard and considered the question.

"Well, I don't see why not," he said.

The Bromkas had another motive for sharing their scholarly work and display of ancient, yet recently made, instruments with the folks from Marcellus.

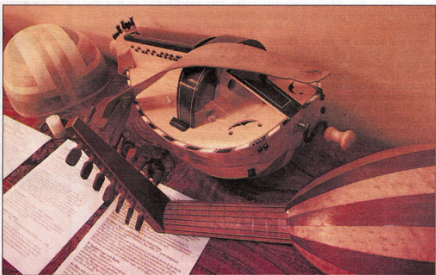
"We're going to put on an Old English mummer's play here at Christmastime," said Sondra.

And the community is invited to take part, she said, in the collaborative theatrical project that will employ dance, medieval music, comedy and a holiday message.

"We see it as an intergenerational annual theater project," Sondra said. "We can all have fun and stretch ourselves and get to know each other and share."



SONDRA BROMKA PLAYS shawm and her husband, John, plays a stringed Irish cittern during a performance and lecture June 24 at Marcellus Free Library. The couple plans a community play and performance involving old music in December at the library.



REPRODUCTIONS OF RENAISSANCE-ERA musical instruments, including a hurdy-gurdy (top) and a