

“Still playing after all these (40) years”

The American Chamber Ensemble

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Blanche Abram and Naomi Drucker first met each other one Friday night 40 years ago. Drucker was playing her clarinet, and Abram was in the audience at a monthly musicale called the Friday Music Club at which Long Island musicians played for one another and chatted.

"We both had young children at the time," said Abram, a professional pianist, music professor at Hofstra University, Baldwin resident and mother of four. "Rather than try to pursue our professions by traveling to out-of-town concerts, we decided to create a framework that would allow us ... to pursue our life's work and be there on the spot for our children."

Drucker's two children and Abrams' four are now fully grown, so the women no longer have to be "on the spot." But the American Chamber Ensemble, which they co-direct, is still going strong in its 40th year.

Next Saturday, the ensemble - which now includes musicians from New York - will play its seventh annual concert at the Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall.

The program, "Mostly Schickele," features excerpts from the ensemble's newest CD, "American Chamber Ensemble Plays Peter Schickele," being released by Elysium Recordings that day. It contains more-or-less serious pieces by Schickele, creator of the supremely whimsical P.D.Q. Bach. The concert also will include a composition by former Brooklyn Philharmonic music director Lukas Foss, who is scheduled to attend, and one by Albert Tepper of Levittown, who also plans to attend. Tepper is one of the many local composers the American Chamber Ensemble has featured.

That tradition of premiering new works and often commissioning them - about 40 in all - continues on March 20, when the ensemble celebrates its 40th anniversary at a Hofstra University concert. It will play pieces by Mozart and Schumann that were part of its first program, at the Freeport Unitarian Church on Jan. 22, 1965, and will present the Long Island premiere of a work it co-commissioned by Benjamin Lees, a former Long Islander who now lives in California. Another founding member, violinist Carol Feuer, will return from North Carolina to join the group, as will original cellist William Grubb.

Working with a composer on a new piece is an exciting process, said Drucker, a Massapequa resident and Hofstra grad who is now on its faculty. "When we have the composer there at rehearsals, sometimes adjustments are made. He might agree to

a different tempo at our recommendation. And he's there to correct wrong notes in the copy and to make suggestions about the balance of the instruments. We get to ask him questions: What does that mean to him, what was his intention in that place, that sort of thing. What we try to do is make the music be the composer's vision of the piece."

Drucker, who handles the ensemble's grant-writing, scheduling and other practical matters, said she got her "passion for working with composers" while a Hofstra freshman. "Albert Tepper was one of my professors and the first person who ever wrote a piece of music for me."

The ensemble has recorded works by Tepper, by Massapequa's Herbert Deutsch, both on 4Tay Records, and by the late Elie Siegmeister of Great Neck. Other CDs - they've recorded about a dozen - include one on which Abram and Drucker played Eskimo drums.

Drucker is also principal clarinetist for the New York Virtuosi Chamber Orchestra and an extra for the New York Philharmonic, where her husband, Stanley Drucker, is principal clarinetist. Stanley will join the ensemble at Carnegie Hall for a Schickele piece called Monochrome 3 for nine b-flat clarinets. "I only had to find seven other clarinetists," Drucker said.

Other ensemble members include violinists Eriko Sato (also frequent concertmaster of the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra) and Juilliard-grad Deborah Wong (featured soloist with many groups), violist Lois Martin (founding member of the Atlantic String Quartet and Fidelio) and cellist Chris Finckel (Manhattan String Quartet member).

The ensemble's other pianist is Marilyn Sherman Lehman of Dix Hills, a former student of Abram's who is now on the faculty at Hofstra and Adelphi universities. She's been a member about 25 years, she said. "As a student, I was their page turner at concerts, so I was learning their repertoire." Though the group has played at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and other locales, "I think we're very proud of our Long Island connections. We play on Long Island, to Long Island audience, and we play Long Island composers."

Weill Recital Hall, Carnegie Hall, Manhattan, March 12,

2 p.m., \$35, CarnegieCharge at 212-247-7800 or www.carnegiehall.org. Hofstra University Monroe Lecture Center Theater, Hempstead, March 20, 3 p.m., \$10 (\$8 seniors and non-Hofstra students), 516-463-6644.