

Raue celebrates piano with famous help

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If you're going to host an event to highlight the "intrigue and power that surrounds the piano," you're going to need some powerful performances. Organizers of this weekend's "America Celebrates the Piano" national conference at the Raue Center for the Arts in Crystal Lake say that's exactly what you can expect.

Along with local piano players, teachers and a children's choir, the three-day event beginning Friday features Melissa Manchester, Kurt Bestor and Danny Wright.

The idea is to engage not only piano players, but the entire community in a celebration of the instrument and American music as the Fourth of July holiday approaches, said Bobbi Paul, the volunteer artistic director for the conference. "The piano is this enduring instrument that is in pretty much everyone's lives, whether they've been entertained by it or taken piano lessons... All of the artists we hear usually have begun their careers starting out on the piano," she said.

An Emmy award winning composer, Bestor has created music for films, CDs, television themes and live shows, including his popular holiday shows performed throughout the western United States. Wright is known as one of the nation's finest pianists and composers, with 35 recordings and more than 6 million albums sold. A Grammy award winning artist, Manchester also is an adjunct professor at University of Southern California, where she shares the art of "conversational singing." She'll offer some of those lessons Saturday, when she, Wright and Bestor host Piano Master Classes throughout the afternoon.

"What I've come to realize, what I know to be true for me anyway, my performance is one-half of a conversation," Manchester said in a phone interview. "The more specific I can know what that conversation is about, the more compelling you are to the performing, the more compelling you are to watch."

That can be applied both to performing and songwriting, said Manchester, whose songs have been recorded by Barbara Streisand, Dusty Springfield, Alison Krauss, Roberta Flack, Johnny Mathis, Kathy Mattea, Mel Torme and many others.

"Composing on the piano is very different than writing on another kind of instrument," she said. The idea is to "reinvent that conversation many times over," she said.

"You're going to have to keep it fresh," she said.

Along with her acclaim as a songwriter and recording artist, Manchester is known as a Broadway performer and actress, having starred in Andrew Lloyd Weber's "Song and Dance" and "Music of the Night" as well as with Kelsey Grammar in "Sweeny Todd," in a recurring role in the television series "Blossom"; and with Bette Midler in the movie "For the Boys." While working in the New York jingle singing circuit early in her career, she met Midler and became her back-up singer, fulfilling a childhood fantasy of playing Carnegie Hall.

"It's a life that has been filled with adventures," Manchester said. "Some have been largely unexpected. The thing about performing for me, it's the hardest race to run, but it's the most engaged that I am ever. "When you do theater, it's a collaborative effort, and it's wonderful to share the stage with other people, particularly if you're part of something that's a masterpiece, but the intimacy of doing a concert just can't be replaced," she said.

Manchester, along with Wright and Bestor, will perform in an America Celebrates the Piano Concert at 8 p.m. Saturday, as well as an InterFaith Concert at 11 a.m. Sunday. The conference begins at 7 p.m. Friday with Fox Hills Grands, 100 local piano students playing on five grand pianos.

"It's the first one," Paul said of the conference, "and it's kind of like having your first child. "You have curiosities and new adventures around every corner. We're excited."

AMERICA CELEBRATES THE PIANO

WHAT: A national piano conference at the Raue Center for the Arts

WHERE: Raue, 26 N. Williams St., Crystal Lake

WHEN: June 29-July 1 Highlights: Fox Hills Grands, 100 local piano students playing on five grand pianos at 7 p.m. June 29 (tickets \$10); Piano Master Classes with Melissa Manchester, Danny Wright and Kurt Bestor from 12:30 p.m. to 4 p.m. June 30; America Celebrates the Piano Concert at 8 p.m. June 30 (tickets \$30); and an InterFaith Concert at 11 a.m. July 1 featuring Danny Wright, a children's choir and special guests Melissa Manchester and Kurt Bestor (tickets \$19). Weekend also includes a Patriotic Cake Contest. Bring a patriotic cake to the Raue Center on Saturday to be judged. Winner receives a Williams Sonoma gift basket. Throughout the conference, a piano-playing marathon will take place at a flag piano placed in the window of the Raue Center.

INFORMATION: 815-356-9212 or go to www.rauecenter.org.