

North County Times
May 6, 2004

Carlsbad-bred string stars return to launch music festival

By: PAM KRAGEN - Staff Writer

You may not know it, but Carlsbad has been the birthing ground for a number of prominent young string players ---- and four of them will pay homage to their hometown May 7 and 8 in the first-ever Carlsbad Music Festival.

Conceived by Carlsbad native Matthew McBane, a 24-year-old composer and violinist, the two-day festival will feature three cutting-edge music ensembles performing an eclectic mix of classical, Romantic, modern and bata percussion music, as well as two original compositions by McBane.

Headlining the festival Friday is the nationally renowned Calder Quartet, one of the hottest chamber ensembles in the United States. The Calder will be joined by the California Quartet, one of San Diego's fastest-rising classical ensembles. And closing the festival Saturday is Peter Jacobson and FLACO, short for the Freestyle Los Angeles Creative Orchestra, which plays everything from classical to percussive Afro-Cuban bata music.

What the festival and these three musical ensembles have in common are members who grew up in Carlsbad under the childhood tutelage of the late Donna Christmas, who taught violin in Carlsbad for many years until her death.

When McBane started lessons with Christmas at the age of 7, her former student Bridget Dolkas (then age 15) was already a local legend. McBane then forged a lifetime friendship with two of Christmas' other young students ---- brothers Ben and Peter Jacobson of Carlsbad.

McBane and the Jacobsons later studied under Fairbanks Ranch violinist Michael Tseitlin and then went on to earn undergraduate degrees at the University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music. They've since moved in different musical directions. Ben, 24, is now first violinist with the Calder Quartet; Peter, a 25-year-old cellist, leads the FLACO ensemble with percussionist Angel Luis Figueroa. McBane is a prolific composer who has written for concert halls, film and theater, as well as a violinist and a conductor. And lifelong Carlsbad resident Dolkas, 32, is now principal second violinist of the Pacific Symphony Orchestra, violinist for the San Diego Symphony and first violinist of the California Quartet.

McBane said he hatched the idea for the festival last fall while talking to his former USC roommate, Benjamin Jacobson.

"We were talking about how we'd all come from Carlsbad and wanted to bring something back to our hometown, and it all came together very quickly," McBane said. "The Calder had been doing very well recently and had a lot of momentum, and we thought it would be great to get them down here to play, and then we thought about Bridget, who still lives in Carlsbad, and her quartet. Then we decided to find a way to involve Peter and FLACO because they're doing really interesting things."

With the help of a grant from the Carlsbad Arts Office, the Carlsbad Music Festival was born. The festival officially began Monday with a performance for the local Rotary Club, and the quartets have been in local classrooms all week conducting educational workshops and concerts for Carlsbad high school students.

McBane ---- who splits his time between homes in L.A. and Carlsbad (he teaches theory and composition at the California Institute of Music in San Diego every weekend) ---- said he deliberately started small with the first Carlsbad Music Festival, but he hopes that if the series is successful, he can revive and expand the festival every year, bringing in new artists each time.

"My idea is that these four Carlsbad musicians will be a part of the festival every year and we'll bring in other young and exciting musicians to keep it fresh," McBane said. "We're not just looking for hotshot classical musicians but people who are doing really creative and interesting things with music."

The festival concert series will open May 7 with the Calder Quartet. The program will include the Beethoven String Quartet Opus 59, No. 3, and Bartok's String Quartet No. 4. The highlight of the program will be the premiere of a new octet by McBane, which will be performed by both the Calder and California quartets. McBane ---- whose musical influences include Philip Glass, John Adams and New York's Bang on a Can ensemble -- -- described his 20-minute octet as "eclectic." "It's really rhythmic and visceral, and concerned with mixing the timbres of the instruments to create an interesting soundscape."

The May 8 concert by FLACO will feature a McBane string trio, as well as a performance of George Crumb's Sonata for Solo Cello performed by Peter Jacobson. Also on the bill is a suite by Astor Piazzolla and a set of traditional Afro-Latin bata (drumming) music.

Ben Jacobson said he's looking forward to bringing his red-hot Calder Quartet to Carlsbad, where he lived for a dozen years.

"My father still lives in Carlsbad and I have friends there, so it will be really nice to be among people we know," Jacobson said. "We always view every concert as being our best concert, so we'll approach it seriously, but because we're among friends, our guard will be down and we can just relax and enjoy it."