

Music from Christmases past



Beth Hall

Beth and Barry Hall, along with their daughter, Avery, will be performing Friday in Sturbridge.

By Staff reports
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WESTBOROUGH — Friday night, Westborough residents Barry and Beth Hall, along with their daughter, Avery, 9, will be performing a selection of medieval Christmas songs at Old Sturbridge Village's "Twelve Nights of Christmas."

Beth Hall recently talked with the News about their performance, entitled "1,000 Years of Christmas Music," as well as their musical backgrounds and the history of medieval music.

Q: Please describe what "1,000 Years of Christmas Music" will entail. What can your audience expect to see and hear?

A: We hope to provide the audience with an excursion into Christmas past through music and discussion of the instruments and songs. To be accurate, "Christmas music" has only been around for about the last 650 years, reaching popularity in the 15th century, declining, then reviving again in the 1700s. Early music celebrating Christmas included hymns and religious songs venerating a Saint, Christ or the Virgin Mary. Before that, in pre-Christian times, "carols" (a French word) were actually circle dances along with singing expressing spiritual joy. For this event we will be featuring at least 14 different instruments, including the Scottish bagpipes, vielle, euphonium, various flutes and whistles, bouzouki, mandolin, drums, violin, viola, and more.

Q: How did you and your husband get into medieval music? What sort of training and education is involved?

A: We've both received classical training, primarily on strings, from an early age. About 20 years ago we were drawn to Medieval and Renaissance music. At the time we were living in California, and we got involved with the San

Francisco Early Music Society, where we expanded our knowledge of medieval music, performance, and even learned how to build medieval instruments.

Q: And your daughter? What will her role be in Friday's performance? How did she get involved?

A: Avery has been exposed to music since before she was born. She seems to have it in her blood and enjoys singing, writing music, and playing the various instruments we have around the house, especially the ukulele and violin. Music is something that our family enjoys doing together, and since she was very young Avery has traveled with us to performances. In Friday's performance, Avery will be singing and playing the bodhrán (Irish drum) and the dulcimer (a string instrument).

Q: What distinguishes medieval musical performances from some other styles?

A: Medieval music often seems simpler in comparison to the complex harmonies of modern music. But it is, in some ways, the essence of music – strong, memorable melodies. Sometimes the harmonies or rhythms seem unusual by today's standards, but generally, music that has been played for hundreds and hundreds of years has survived for good reason – because it is beautiful, compelling, or it speaks to people in a powerful way.

Q: What do you enjoy most about performing?

A: We like being able to share something with others that will evoke deep emotions. Of course, not every song does that, but certain songs really resonate with people. A while ago, after performing an original piece for vocals and didgeridoo, a woman came up to the stage with tears in her eyes saying how much it moved her. That kind of interaction makes all the hard work and practice worthwhile.

Q: Why does this particular musical genre appeal to you?

A: We both have strong choral training in our background, much of it with sacred and early music. The melodies are really lovely and rich. We also like to collect obscure instruments and try to fit them into various songs. One piece we will be performing at Sturbridge is on a bone flute – a replica of a first century Viking instrument. The piece we play is from a fragment of the oldest preserved piece of music from Denmark. It's not exactly Christmas music in the strictest sense, but we combine it with a 12th century piece venerating a saint from the Orkney Islands in Scotland and call it our "Viking Set."

Q: What are the characteristics of medieval Christmas music, i.e. the themes, moods, etc.? In other words, how is Christmas celebrated in the medieval musical tradition?

A: Christmas has obviously been celebrated in music for many, many years. The format and style have varied over time, from a Medieval “conductus” to a French noel to an English carol. The roots of the winter Christmas celebration include a pagan celebration of light, and many Christmas customs and themes (holly, mistletoe, candles, etc.) stem from these earlier traditions.

Q: Do you have a favorite song, either to play or listen to?

A: One of our favorite songs, which we will be performing Friday, is the Hymn of St. Magnus. The tune is haunting and deeply moving. It seems to give the sensation of floating in the sea on gently rolling waves, which is interesting because it was written on an island back in the 12th century.

Q: What other venues have you performed at?

A: We’ve performed at venues across the United States and in Europe, including concert halls, cathedrals, castles, renaissance fairs, universities, even in caves and once in a clay quarry. Interestingly, we met each other many years ago when we were both touring Poland with a string orchestra. At that time, Poland was still behind the Iron Curtain and they were very appreciative of Western musicians who made the effort to share music and culture with them. We had some great experiences on that tour, including “jamming” with some folk fiddlers in a little village high in the Carpathian mountains. We couldn’t speak a word with them, but fortunately music is a universal language.

The Halls can be reached via their Web site, www.Ninestones.com, where you can hear samples of their CD, “A Feast of Songs.” They are currently working on their next CD scheduled for release in November 2010. For the month of December, 20 percent of all profits from CD sales made through their Web site will be donated to the Westborough Food Pantry. For more information about attending their performance tonight, which begins at 6 p.m., visit Old Sturbridge Village’s Web site at www.osv.org.

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