

Caledon Music Festival returns in September

By Rob Paul

After a year without in-person concerts, the Caledon Music Festival is making its return this September.

On September 10 and 12, Alton Mills Art Centre will play host to two classical music concerts.

It's an event that will bring lovers of classical music together in celebration of the art and of the return of live music. The music festival has been a mainstay in Caledon for years, but the performers and organizers are extra-excited this year having not been able to run the normal event in 2020.

Artistic Director Emily Rho says the reason organizers and performer love this particular event so much is because it is a community-driven event.

"The music festival started awhile back, in 2013, under the name, Belfountain Music Festival," Rho said. "The original founders' mission was to bring live music to the community and one of the most important things was to include community members as part of the performance at the festival. Community members being students who were interested in music or amateur musicians? it's always been the mission to bring people together through music."

Last year, without being able to have the festival in its regular capacity, the organizers pivoted to online and though it was successful, Rho is thankful they'll be back to an in-person event this year because it loses something when the audience isn't able to feel the connection to the artist.

"I came in 2019 and 2020 was the first year we decided to change the name to the Caledon Music Festival and then the pandemic hit so we didn't actually get to present the concerts in person. Last year? we partnered with the Bethell Hospice Foundation to present three virtual concerts in April and May, and we produced a couple of videos to share with our following."

"This year, until very recently, it was unclear if we could actually go ahead with this as everything was still closed, and even when things opened up, live music events seemed like it was one of the last things to come back. We didn't want to put it off for another year if we could find a window where we could do this in person and we didn't want to repeat with another virtual season. That's why we decided to do this at Alton Mill, where we've presented concerts in past years."

The precautions that go into hosting the concert during the pandemic has made it more difficult than in years past, especially with the ever-changing nature of COVID-19, but the new outdoor tent at Alton Mill has been a game changer for the layout of the event.

"It's a lot trickier than other years," she said. "It feels like we're doing it for the first time, really, in terms of communicating with the venue and trying to find the right dates and times while thinking about the COVID safety protocols with what's safe and what's not, because it's always changing. With that comes planning, like for distancing, how are we going to configure the seating at the venue? There are just all sorts of things we've never really had to think about that we're now having to research and see if we can do it. Thankfully, the outdoor tent where we're going to be doing our concerts at the Mill is huge and there's so much air flow? it's allowing us to be outdoors for the concerts."

The two concerts will take on different themes with Friday evening being titled Cocktails and Classics, and Beer and Baroque for the Sunday afternoon concert.

The two concerts will feature the same lineup of Travis Harrison (bass), Emily Kruspe (violin), Katya Poplyansky (violin), Rory McLeod (viola), Terry Lim (flute), Sarah Yunji Moon (flute), Emily Vondrejsova (soprano), and Amahl Arulanandam (cello), but they'll be playing different pieces.

'We have eight artists, and all eight artists are performing at the Friday night and the Sunday afternoon concerts,' Rho said. 'They'll be performing in different configurations, so some will play solo one night and then the next concert they might be playing as part of a bigger ensemble. Among the eight there's a lot of variety—two violinists, one viola player, one cello, one bassist, two flutists, and one singer. It will be a mix of classical music pieces—like Clair de Lune —it's one of my favourite that I had been dying to program—and there's some folksy double bass solos and some jazzy flute. That's on the Friday. On the Sunday, the concert is titled, 'Beer and Baroque,' so we'll have some Baroque music by Bach and Handel.

'Back in 2019, we started a singalong component to get everybody in the audience involved as part of the concert, and we're going to do that again. So, there will be a singalong and then we'll finish the festival with Dvořák String Sextet, which has a proven record as an audience favourite in other classical music festivals so I think it will be really fun.'

For Rho, building a classical artists lineup as the artistic director of the concert is made easier by the amount of connections she has made in the music world through her years as a pianist and her previous involvement with the festival.

'I've been involved with the festival as an organizer the last few years but before that I was a volunteer and performer as well,' she said. 'Emily Vondrejsová is a singer who will be leading the singalong and she's going to have another separate set as part of the program and she's local to Caledon; she's been singing with us the past few years. Our double bass player, Travis Harrison, performed at the festival two years ago and was part of our videos last year, same for our violist Rory McLeod. He's actually my husband and he's been performing at the festival for a while, his brother was actually the artistic director when it was called the Belfountain Music Festival—there's a lot of family and friend connections here. Then, through being in the music business you make lots of connections and I always try to mix things up and bring in new artists while keeping some of the older more established ones. It's always a mix of old and new.'

Many of the performers have played on noteworthy stages, but what keeps bringing them back to the Caledon Music Festival is the chance to play in an intimate setting where they can truly connect with fellow lovers of classic music.

'Every year, the motivation is to connect with an audience that we haven't necessarily connected with before,' she said. 'Some of our artists often play in bigger halls—Roy Thomson Hall and Four Seasons Centre—where there's almost no connection between the audience and the artist. As artists, we really crave that connection and the opportunity to actually meet people and get to know people. Some of our artists are coming back and some are local, so we start to see the same people and we start to make friends. In any given year that's our motivation, but this year, we haven't been performing for the last 17 months. We are hungry to just play for people and, this year, that's the main difference.'