

*A v e n u e s 23*

*Yes, yes, nonet arts*

*The Musical Offering: The group that keeps on giving*

By Janet Lunder Hanafin

Chamber musicians in concert always look like they're enjoying an inside joke. The players glance at each other, raise their eyebrows, nod, lift a chin, sway to the music or exhibit a tiny smile or frown. The audience can almost have as much fun watching as listening.

Chamber music usually features only one instrument per part, with the players handing off musical lines as if in a spirited conversation. Trust is a vital component of the mix, according to Rees Allison, chairman of the Music Department at Hamline University.

A pianist and harpsichordist, Allison is the founder and the only original member of the Musical Offering, one of the oldest if not the oldest chamber music group in the area. On January 7, it will present "The French Connection," the second concert of its 35th anniversary season.

The Musical Offering began as a quintet in 1971 with Allison and four colleagues who played the violin, cello, flute and oboe. In the mid-1980s the group added a viola, clarinet, bassoon and bass. Its varied combinations of those instruments can make for some outstanding programming, according to Allison.

In the early days, the group tried to be democratic and keep the work load equal, he said. Now the players will get together in smaller ensembles and invite guest musicians and singers to solo or add another instrument as needed. The group performs both obscure and familiar pieces from the vast repertoire of chamber music of the past three centuries. Compositions written expressly for nonets are few. In fact, the group has performed all 10 or so that exist.

Oboist Basil Reeve, a Musical Offering member since 1972, draws up the programs, which are usually centered on a theme. For the January 7 concert, the ensemble will present 20th century works by four French composers. John Francaix's "L'heure du Berger" was written for a woodwind quintet and piano. Darius Milhaud's Quartet for flute, clarinet, oboe and piano reflects both Brazilian and jazz influences.

Kathy Kienzle, principal harp with the Minnesota Orchestra, will join the ensemble for Debussy's "Sonata" for flute, viola and harp and Ravel's "Introduction and Allegro" for harp, flute, clarinet, viola, cello, bass and two violins. "They're two of the most important pieces of chamber music written for the harp," said Kienzle, a resident of Merriam Park.

All of the Musical Offering's members make their living by performing or teaching music. Most are also members of the Minnesota Orchestra, and others occasionally appear with the Minnesota Orchestra or St. Paul Chamber Orchestra.

Norbert Nielubowski, who plays bassoon and contrabassoon with the Minnesota Orchestra, joined the Musical Offering in 1988. A Macalester-Groveland resident, he is married to Caroline Lemen, who plays French horn with the Musical Offering and teaches at Macalester and Augsburg colleges.

"We've had lot of changes in the group since I've been a member," Nielubowski said, "some bittersweet and one incredibly sad. Some members left the group when they left the Minnesota Orchestra for other jobs, and our flutist, Adele Lorraine, one of the founding members, suffered a stroke and wasn't able to return to playing."

Rounding out the group are clarinetist Joseph Longo, violinist Michael Sutton, violist Aaron Janse, bassist Susan Allard and flutist Jane Garvin.

After 35 years, the Musical Offering has become multigenerational. Some of the newest members hadn't even started music lessons when Allison and Reeve were anchoring the group.

With every new member, "the musical and personal dynamics change," Nielubowski said. "(Members) sometimes have different views on how the music should be played. It's up to us to come up with a musical statement that takes these different views into consideration while remaining faithful to what the composer wanted."

Musical Offering concerts are relatively informal affairs. Marty Dworkin, president of the group's board of directors, will introduce the program. The musicians themselves will then add their own insights, giving the audience an idea of what to expect and underscoring interesting aspects of the repertoire.

Playing chamber music "gives you a chance to really get in touch with the creative part of being a musician," Nielubowski said. "You have a much bigger role in interpreting the performance."

"Having played with this group for 35 years, I can say it never has been better in terms of the focused and thoughtful programs, the way we prepare and the abilities of the players," Allison said. "One would expect as we get older, we'd go into some type of decline, but it hasn't happened. It's been an interesting synergy between the young people and the older people."

"The French Connection" will be presented at 3:00 p.m. Sunday, January 7, in Sundin Music Hall at Hamline University, 1531 Hewitt Ave. Tickets are \$15 with discounts available for students and seniors. Call 651-523-2459.