

Creative Living

celebrating all good things

Women's work

Sept. 19-25, 2018

The Hudson Valley Folk Guild honors creative women in 'Beyond a Simple Folk Song.' by Kate Goldsmith

Hudson Valley Folk Guild presents
"Beyond a Simple Folk Song:
Creative Women"
Sunday, Sept. 23, 2 p.m.
Cunneen-Hackett Arts Center Theater
12 Vassar St., Poughkeepsie
Tickets \$10 at the door
(845) 229-0170
hvfolds@aol.com

The Hudson Valley Folk Guild (HVFG) will present "Beyond a Simple Folk Song" on Sunday afternoon at the Cunneen-Hackett Theater in Poughkeepsie. Established in 2009 by HVFG's co-founder Kevin Becker as a challenge to stretch members' creative chops, the concert has become a highly anticipated occasion, and one sporting a particular theme this year: Creative Women.

The lineup includes Helen Avakian, singer-songwriter and International Fingerstyle Guitar Champion, only the second woman to win that honor; "Herstorians" Pat Lamanna and Sharleen Leahey, performing protest songs to commemorate the women's suffrage movement of the early 20th century; singer-songwriter Neil Okeson, presenting his song cycle about a fictional chanteuse who endured the Nazi occupation of Paris during World War II; and Becker, who has arranged a quartet of songs written by Hudson Valley women for four voices.

Becker decided on the theme last year, and had a good sense of who he wanted to participate.

"Helen Avakian is a fantastic guitar player, so she was a very appropriate choice," he said during a recent telephone interview.

Many Hudson Valley music-lovers are familiar with Avakian, who resided and performed for many years throughout the region before moving to Wisconsin.

"She was so positive about making this happen," added Becker.

Speaking from her new hometown last week, Avakian said she will "stick to the theme," which is songs either by or about women, noting that "I get to do my own music."

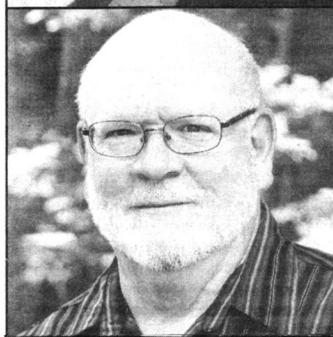
Without giving away too much of her set list, Avakian said she will perform "Drifting Days (Spider Song)" from her "Vanishing Point" album, a song inspired by Nien Cheng, who was imprisoned during China's Cultural Revolution and wrote about her experiences in "Life and Death in Shanghai."

"I have a song about my mother; I'll see if I can do that one," she said. "I have a sister song ... it depends on how much time I have [in the set]."

Avakian regularly visits her old home turf.

"It's always a pleasure to be in the Hudson Valley," she said. "I love the Folk Guild very much, always excited to play [for them]."

Visit www.helenavakian.com for more information.



Hudson Valley Folk Guild performers (clockwise from top left) Helen Avakian, Pat Lamanna and Sharleen Leahey, Neil Okeson and Kevin Becker are featured in "Beyond A Simple Folk Song," a major annual event for the Folk Guild. This year's concert is set at the Cunneen-Hackett Arts Center Theater on Sunday. Courtesy photos; photo of Helen Avakian by Antonio Marino Jr.

The "Herstorians" will key their program to the ongoing centennial celebration of the women's suffrage movement, which resulted in women getting the right to vote in New York State in 1917 and nationally in 1920. Singer-songwriter Lamanna said the "Herstorians" have been presenting the program since 2017 and will continue through 2020.

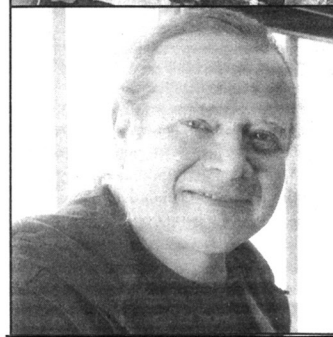
"A lot of what we're doing is protest songs from the women's suffrage movement, a couple of original songs and a contemporary one that we didn't write but dates back to the women's suffrage movement, a really cool song," she said, speaking recently via phone.

Lamanna, a former social worker and college instructor, recalls Pete Seeger coming to the summer camp in the Catskills she attended as a child.

"Pete would visit in the late '50s, especially when he was blacklisted and didn't have the opportunity to make money in many ways," she said. "He'd spend the week here and there [at the various camps]."

In her youth, Lamanna didn't have much interaction with Seeger, but as an adult she got to know him in the early 2000s, during weekly protests against the Iraq war held at the intersection of Route 9 and Route 9D in Wappingers Falls.

Seeger also inspired Lamanna to pick up the banjo, which she'll play during Sunday's program, with Leahey playing guitar. Their historical programs normally include background information, but Lamanna said they'll be keeping that to a



minimum, just to "put some context around the songs."

"We want to get in as many songs as possible," she said.

Visit www.patlamanna.com to learn more about the artist.

Brooklyn-based singer-songwriter Neil Okeson will present his song cycle about the fictional Madame Olivia Toulon; the work features Okeson on piano and tenor vocals and Jennifer Nelson on violin and soprano vocals.

Speaking by phone recently, Okeson said he came up with the story about two years ago.

"I just kind of started with a scene in my mind of an old woman sitting in a Paris café, most of her life is behind her, and she is reminiscing about World War II," he said. "The story just kind of ballooned into all these characters and events. I decided it was a good enough story to select events to reflect this character's life."

Okeson is a member of the HVFG Rock Tavern Chapter (where his studio is located), which is how he met Becker and got involved with "Beyond a Simple Folk Song." He participated in last year's concert, doing a tenor solo in a dramatic reading of a one-act musical play, "Escape to Freedom," depicting the true story of two refugees who fled from South Vietnam after the fall of Saigon. Becker composed the music for the play written by his aunt, Maryellen Jonczyk.

"I said [to Becker], 'Keep me in mind for next year,'" Okeson said.

The song cycle is "in more of a classical

format ... out of the [folk] genre; in fact, there are no guitars in my set at all," he said. This jibes well with the mission of the concert, going "Beyond a Simple Folk Song."

Learn more about Okeson at www.neilokeson.com.

Becker noted 2018 marks somewhat of a departure for his contribution.

"For this concert, I usually create something new," he said. "The instrumentation is usually outside of the folk realm, chamber ensemble, but this year with the theme, I thought what might make the most sense would be not to do my own work but honor local singer-songwriters in the area. I picked out four singer-songwriters and songs I've heard over the years and liked."

The four are Lori Cassels, Pat Lamanna, Jane March and Lu Anne Thompson-Martucci.

"I've taken the songs and created four-part songs for voices," Becker said.

The vocal ensemble will be soprano Carol Becker, alto Linda Breithaupt, tenor Neil Okeson and bass Steve Allen. Linda McCarthy will be the pianist and Samantha Lawrence will play percussion.

Lawrence is the recipient of this year's Frank S. Tetler Legacy award, an annual scholarship the Folk Guild awards to an outstanding student pursuing music as their college major.

"Samantha studies music therapy at SUNY New Paltz, and her main instrument is percussion," said Becker. "I've heard her play, so I know she's really good."

A second award will be given this year to Andrew Pacht, recipient of the Patrick P. Daley Memorial Scholarship. Pacht will also perform a solo piece for trombone to start the show, "Fanfare" by John Kenny.

"There weren't enough funds to make this a yearly scholarship, but we got so many donations that we decided to just take the money into the treasury and out as a memorial scholarship," Becker said.

Pacht was the runner-up of the Tetler Legacy scholarship, Becker explained.

Since 2009, "Beyond a Simple Folk Song" has presented and premiered a wide variety of creative music. Some examples include dramatic narrations with song such as Fran Palmiere's "Abraham Lincoln, The Early Years" and Herb Haufrecht's cantata "We've Come from the City" which dealt with the 1940s controversy of the Ashokan Reservoir providing water to New York City.

Other new music and arrangements featured over the years have included the Piedmont Blues, several song cycles and chamber pieces for a variety of ensembles.

For more information on the concert or the Hudson Valley Folk Guild, contact Becker at (845) 229-0170 or hvfolds@aol.com or visit <https://hudsonvalleyfolkguild.org>. ♦

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