

The Guide

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Musica Dolce, Festival Ballet, artists' co-op join forces

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By Marshall Williams

The "Nutcracker" comes to Westerly for the first time when a virtual "festival of the arts" fills the George Kent Performance Hall Saturday, as the local chamber orchestra Musica Dolce joins forces with Festival Ballet Providence and the Artists' Cooperative Gallery of Westerly for a holiday gift of ballet, music and fine art.

"This will be a new experience for everyone involved, and for the audience," says organizer Joseph Ceo, artistic director of Musica Dolce. "We would like to add something new to the artistic experience here in Westerly."

Musica Dolce regularly schedules a "Seasonal Classics" concert at this time of the year, but instead of a musical program, Ceo and his troupe envisioned a broader range of talents for this holiday season.



Musica Dolce Artistic Director Joseph Ceo

"We've never done anything with a ballet," Ceo says, "so this is a first for us, and we also want to get the artists' cooperative more involved with the musical activities in Westerly, so we've invited them to put up a gallery show before and after the concert."

The cooperative, says Ceo, will be selecting 50 works that will be on display downstairs in the reception room, beginning at 6 p.m. before the 7:30 concert, and also following the performance, when there will be a reception for the audience to meet all the artists involved with this production.

In many ways the evening should harken back to the days when the building, now owned by the Chorus of Westerly, was known as Westerly's Center for the Arts.

Though Musica Dolce is accompanying its first ballet performance, Ceo himself is no stranger to ballet, or to the "Nutcracker," Tchaikovsky's endearing and enduring Christmas classic. Musica Dolce will be playing a 25-piece arrangement of the score written by Ceo, which is used by several dozen ballet companies around the country (Ceo and his wife Joan will be playing the same adaptation later in December with the Washington Ballet).

This gave Ceo the idea to invite the Festival Ballet Providence – a 30-year-old company given new life recently by artistic director Mihailo "Misha" Djuric – to travel to South County for the first time. Two of the company's star performers, Vilia Putrius, from Lithuania, and Gleb Lyamenkoff, from Russia, will be performing the climactic scenes of Act II of the "Nutcracker," including the Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy, the Tarantella, and the final Grand Pas de Deux.

"We're very excited to be coming to Westerly," says Djuric. "We've been trying to reach as many different parts of Rhode Island as we can." Festival Ballet has grown from a budget of \$350,000 to \$1.7 million under Djuric's leadership, and is achieving a national reputation. The company performs in Providence, where it has a new permanent home, and tours regularly around New England. Djuric says that there are plans to return to Westerly, perhaps as soon as next spring.

Another first for Saturday's concert will be the premiere of a new work by Musica Dolce's resident composer, Paul Rosenbloom. His "Christmas Rhapsody" for solo violin and orchestra incorporates the music of three familiar Christmas carols. It will be performed by concertmaster Ann Samuelson with the 25-member orchestra.

Also on the program will be "Ancient Airs and Dances," perhaps the best-known work of Italian composer Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936). "Ancient Airs and Dances," says Ceo, "is a suite of Renaissance music Respighi orchestrated for a small orchestra – lute music from the 16th century by various Renaissance composers." In a series of popular compositions, Respighi turned these dances and airs into delightful orchestral music. "You have the strings, the winds, the harp and the harpsichord," says Ceo, a violinist, "and you can put together a nice combination with that, which sounds like the lute."

But the real highlight of the evening, says Ceo, will be the collaboration with Festival Ballet Providence. "They are sending two of their best soloists" to dance the "Nutcracker" solos and duets, he says.

Ballerina Vilia Putrius was born in Lithuania, and received her early training from the Vilnius Ballet School, joining the Lithuanian National Opera and Ballet after graduating in 1995. She was a soloist in that company for six years, touring Holland, Denmark, Greece, France, Egypt, Japan and the U.S. In 2001 she joined Ballet Arlington in Texas, and in 2004, Boston Ballet. This is her second season with Festival Ballet Providence. Last year she danced major roles in "The Widow's Broom," Balanchine's "Rubies," "Allegro Brillante" and "Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux," and Jerome Robbins' "2 and 3 Part Inventions." She is married to Boston Ballet soloist Mindaugas Bauzys.

This will be the seventh season at Festival Ballet for Gleb Lyamenkoff, a White Russian born in Orsha, Belarus, where he studied with the Dance Academy of Belarus. He then studied and danced in Russia and France, and his classical repertoire includes the roles of Claude Frolo in "Esmeralda," the Cavalier in "The Nutcracker," Prince Charming in "Cinderella," Albrecht in "Giselle," Prince Desiré in "Sleeping Beauty," the Thief in "Con Amore," Basilio and Espada in "Don Quixote" and the Prince in "The Princess and the Pea." Last year he created the role of the Broom in Festival Ballet's acclaimed new production, "The Widow's Broom."

"This is a big production for us," says Joseph Ceo of Musica Dolce about Saturday's extravaganza for Westerly audiences. "It's more elaborate than what we usually do, but we're going to pull it off."

Music Dolce's "Seasonal Classics" Concert will be held Saturday, Nov. 24, at 7:30 p.m. (the gallery opens at 6 p.m.) with a reception following. A snow date is set for Sunday, Nov. 25, at 7:30. Tickets are \$25 and \$30 for general admission; \$15 for students and seniors; and children under 12 will be admitted free. Tickets are available at the Artists' Cooperative Gallery of Westerly and Other Tiger Bookstore, both in downtown Westerly. For additional information, call (401) 315-0373.