Calling all Star Wars fans

LENNOX – Join Star Wars enthusiast and host Peter Struzziero for an evening featuring all things Star Wars on Friday, Oct. 19 from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. at the Lenox Library. Participants may come dressed as a character for the costume contest, bring show-and-tell items, join in a trivia contest, play video games, learn about the history of Star Wars, and more. This event is free and registration is not required. The program is intended for ages six and older, and children younger than 13 must be supervised by an adult. For more information, call 637-0197 ext. 105.

Music

Berkshire Bach to perform at Zimmermann’s in Leipzig

GREAT BARRINGTON – Bach Chamber Music Concerts will be at Zimmermann’s Coffeehaus in Leipzig on Oct. 28. The program will feature members of the Berkshire Bach Ensemble along with renowned harpsichordist Kenneth Cooper.

Cellist Yehuda Hanani is to perform with guitarist Eliot Fisk (left and bottom right). Above right, Hanani with violinist Yehonatan Berick and pianist and composer Joan Tower.

Music that illuminates

Close Encounters offers classical to cutting edge

By David Scribner

The Berkshires are home to distinguished cultural events, but none so brilliant, perhaps, as the chamber music series, Close Encounters with Music, that opens its 21st season this Saturday at the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center in Great Barrington.

True to its tradition of presenting the unexpected, the October 20 CEMW program focuses on a rarely heard format: piano works for four hands. On the program are works by Schubert, Milhaud, Mozart, Chopin and Corigliano, performed by the Russian-born duo, Vassily Primakov and Natalia Lavrova, both winners of prestigious international competitions.

The Close Encounters series is the brainchild of Israeli-born cellist Yehuda Hanani, and it is precisely what its name implies – an intimate encounter with a stunning array of musical traditions from a variety of cultures and eras. But it is also an encounter with the intellectual and artistic contexts in which music was composed and treasured.

Before each concert begins, Hanani takes to the stage to deliver his witty, informed and insightful commentary on the theme of the music the audience is about to experience. And his remarks, replete with information about the music and the composer (“Beethoven’s student Carl Czerny worked on four or five pieces at once, and lived alone with nine cats.”) are delicious hors d’oeuvres to the musical feast to follow.

“We pioneered the thematic concert format. Music shouldn’t exist in a vacuum,” Hanani observes, speaking from his home in Spencertown, N.Y. “It takes place in a much larger cultural experience. I try to connect the dots, and make the link between painting, the arts, literature and the evolution of thought in the West. By putting music in context, it becomes a mirror of our life.”

A professor of violoncello at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory, international soloist and master class teacher, Hanani infuses his students with the same embrace of what the music represents in the wider cultural milieu.

“When I have my students learn Debussy, for instance, I send them to the museum to study impressionist paintings, to absorb the aesthetic concepts that, with Debussy, were expressed with music rather than pigment.”

“When he was 19, Leonard Bernstein heard Hanani perform, and persuaded Israeli officials to have him released from military duty so that he could attend Juilliard where he studied with Leonard Rose.

His approach for the Close Encounters chamber music concert series seems to have struck a chord with music lovers – in fact, by attendance figures for chamber music they are hugely popular. Close Encounters attracts audiences of 450 to 500 at the Mahaiwe performances.

“Our objective is to have a blend of classical, contemporary and cutting-edge music,” Hanani observed. “Our audiences are responding very well. We try to have the quality of performances that you would hear at Lincoln Center, with an intimacy that exceeds the New York experience. In New York, you are doing well to get 400 people for a chamber music concert, but it’s amazing that in the rural Berkshires we regularly get that size audience. We are informal and friendly. It’s like a family, and it feels as if you are playing for friends.”

Close Encounters with Music programs are indeed an eclectic exploration of musical styles. In the past year, concerts offered the Chamber Orchestra Kremlin; a celebration of Franz Liszt (“Lisztomania”); the Grand Piano Quartet of Schumann and Brahms; an exploration of China’s influence on music that included the American premiere of a piece for pipa and cello; string quartets by Beethoven, Schubert and Berg; and an array of compositions from the Roaring Twenties.

This season, the lineup is just as diverse. It includes a documentary film, “Shadows in Paradise,” to be shown at the Little Cinema in Pittsfield; a baroque festival with the Tragicomedia Baroque Ensemble; two concerts of Grand Piano trios; an evening with the baritone Benjamin Luxon, offering observations on open, to be held at the Lenox Club; Nordic LIGHTS, an examination of the music of Edvard Grieg; and a concert of music for soprano, guitar and cello, featuring Eliot Fisk on guitar, Jennifer Zetland, soprano, and Hanani on cello.

“We try to think globally,” Hanani explains. “We like to bring the world to Great Barrington.”