

A classical performance



The Sheridan Press/Blaine McCartney

With help from Sheridan Senior Center employees, from left, Executive Director Carmen Rideout; volunteer Karen Clift; Director of Development Rindy West and Family Caregiver Director Stella Montano the one-woman play “Clara’s Visitor” will be performed at the WYO Theater in Sheridan on Friday. After expenses, proceeds from the play will benefit the Family Caregiver Program at the Sheridan Senior Center. The caregiver program assists people like Billie Holmenbeck (middle) who was a caregiver to her husband after he fell and broke his neck. Mr. Holmenbeck died in December, 2008.

• Play tells Schumann’s story, helps Senior Center program

By Janet Donoho

people@thesheridanpress.com

Sheridan soprano Karen Clift kept hearing about a remarkable one-woman play — “Clara’s Visitor.” People were raving about it and her friend, Stephanie Wendt, is the author and performer.

Clift could have traveled to see the play herself, but decided on another course.

“I heard so much about this play, I wanted to bring it to Sheridan,” Clift said.

“Clara’s Visitor” is the story of Clara Schumann, wife of renowned German composer Robert Schumann. Clara Schumann’s life as an accomplished composer was somewhat overshadowed by her famous husband, however she had an unprecedented career as a composer and concert pianist, particularly for a woman of the mid-1800s.

“Clara’s Visitor” Friday at the WYO

“Clara’s Visitor,” a one-woman play with live piano performance is set for 7:30 p.m. Friday at the WYO Theater.

Three special residency programs are planned in advance of the performance and will be presented by pianist and actress Stephanie Wendt.

Programs are 4-5:30 p.m. Wednesday at Sheridan College, Music Room 112 in the Whitney Building; 8:20-9:12 a.m. Thursday in the Sue Henry Theater for the Performing Arts at Sheridan High School; and 5:30-6:30 p.m. Thursday at the Sheridan Senior Center. The program at the Senior Center will include two Brahms songs performed by Wendt’s husband, baritone Brent Johnson; two solos written by Clara Schumann and performed by Sheridan soprano Karen Clift; and two duets written by Robert Schumann and performed by Clift and Johnson.

Performance and residencies are possible through the support of the Sheridan Arts Council, Witzel Family Foundation, Sheridan Senior Center and Wyoming Arts Council.

Classical

(Continued from Page 1)

Presented as a one-woman show by Minnesota pianist and actress Wendt, the play features Clara Schumann's words and compositions, along with music by Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms.

Through a partnership with the Sheridan Senior Center, the help of the Sheridan Arts Council, Wyoming Arts Council, the Witzel Family Foundation and community sponsors, Clift is bringing "Clara's Visitor" to Sheridan at 7:30 p.m. Friday at the WYO Theater.

Clift originally proposed her idea to Senior Center Executive Director Carmen Rideout and Development Director Rindy West, along with Nick Johnson, executive director of the WYO Theater.

"They were all very excited," Clift said. "I proposed the project, they said immediately they were on board, and it has been a great partnership ever since."

As plans moved forward, the idea surfaced to have proceeds from the performance (after expenses) benefit the Family Caregiver Program at the Senior Center.

"Clara was a caregiver," Clift said, adding that Robert Schumann suffered from mental illness, making life difficult for his wife. Robert Schumann was said to be suicidal and was eventually admitted to an asylum.

Stella Montano, director of family caregiver services at the Senior Center, said having the performance benefit the caregiver program is "a natural fit."

"Clara was a caregiver, a mother of seven children who also had a husband with mental illness," she said. "Obviously care giving transcends history. Our goal with the caregiver program is to keep people in their homes — as Clara helped do in the 1800s. They may have been harder times then, but for any individual going through this, it isn't ever easy."

Wendt has said the play she authored reveals Clara Schumann's fervor and vulnerabilities, her brilliance and determination. Clift said Wendt brings those traits to life in her performance.

"Stephanie is an interesting presenter," said Clift, who met Wendt in Minnesota. "She is not only a great performer, but a quality piano teacher and a broadcaster. It is incredibly interesting to listen to her — she makes things come to life."

Clift also said the performance will reveal that classical performers were "not just penguins walking around in tuxedos."

"This is a very juicy story," she said. "There is a triangle of intrigue relating to the Schumanns, and a young, handsome Johannes Brahms. Classical music is not always approachable for some people, however here is a real life story about a brilliant performer caring for her ill husband, trying to make ends meet, and another young man is interested in her. Nothing about the story is old-fashioned, except that it took place some time ago."

To whet appetites in the community, Wendt will be offering three residencies (an educational sampling of what the artist does) on Wednesday and Thursday at Sheridan College, Sheridan High School and the Senior Center.

"In the residencies Stephanie will give a taste of the story and what happens in the drama, but will not portray Clara," Clift said. "She will set up the historical background, the general story and talk about her scholastic process of researching and writing the script."

Clift said these presentations are informal and fun, and open to everyone in the community.

The residency at the Senior Center will include two Brahms songs performed by Wendt's husband, baritone Brent Johnson; two solos written by Clara Schumann and performed by Clift; and two duets written by Robert Schumann and performed by Clift and Johnson. Wendt will provide piano accompaniment.

West said the process of getting the production from planning to the performance on Friday has been a team effort.

"We shared responsibilities of advertising, marketing and spreading the word about what we are bringing to the community," she said. "This is a high-caliber, inspiring project, a new type of event for the Senior Center."

"When I start telling people about this, they get so excited and I find myself even more excited about it," Montano added.

"This is appealing for me as a classical performer," Clift said. "I'm excited to share classical music with a diverse audience — to be able to reach seniors and students and anyone interested. They'll find this is a highly entertaining production, with the components of drama and live music."

"Stephanie's acting is incredible, her piano playing is top notch, and it all comes together in a really riveting tale."