

Features

Mercy Founders Club slates unprecedented double bill

By Emily Morrison

When "Mr. Piano," Roger Williams, plays the Eastman Theater for the Founders Club of the Sisters of Mercy on Sunday, Nov. 15, the occasion will be the next best thing to coming home.

Williams, the popular pianist who has performed for every American president since Harry Truman, played the first gig of his career at the Five O'Clock Club, a block from the Eastman Theater. For a month in 1956, Williams performed for after-concert crowds that included Rochester newspaperman Henry Clune (a friend of the club's owner, the late Lou DeLeo) and local orchestra leader Carl Dengler.

After recording his first hit single, "Autumn Leaves," which sold more than three million copies, Williams returned to Rochester for his first big concert date. This time, he played at the Eastman Theater itself and, over the ensuing years, has come back six or eight times to make concert appearances and renew old acquaintances. Although he finds Rochester's lake-effect winds among the coldest he's ever encountered on a January night — with the possible exception of conditions in Alaska — Williams voices nothing but praise for the warmth of local residents.

"Up in Rochester, everybody's just one big family," Williams commented during a telephone interview last week from his home in Encino, Calif. This coming weekend, as Williams observed, he'll be given another chance to return to his musical roots.

The annual Founders Club concert represents yet another first for the versatile soloist. "This is the first time I've ever split a bill — or played with a singer," he noted. When Williams ascends the familiar Eastman stage for two appearances this Sunday, he'll share the limelight with renowned soprano Roberta Peters, the Metropolitan Opera star, who will sing a variety of well-known operatic arias, Viennese songs, traditional favorites and show tunes for her Rochester audience.

Peters also has connections with the region



encompassed by the Rochester diocese, although she's not nearly as familiar with the city itself. "My son went to Ithaca College," said Peters last Friday from her home in Scarsdale, N.Y. "I gave a concert (at the college) and was very impressed with the school and its president, James Whelan. I have given Ithaca College all my memorabilia over the years — costumes, recordings, books and posters."

Ithaca College, she added, will display this visual record of her career in the campus library of the institution Peters serves as an active member of the board of trustees. For a more resounding impression of Peters' considerable talents, area residents are advised to make the trip in to Rochester this weekend to attend either a 2:30 p.m. or an 8:30 p.m. performance. The two entertainers will perform separately, until a grand finale Williams has entitled "The Three Mountain Suite." He'll play "Springtime in the Rockies," Peters will sing "Climb Every Mountain" and the pair will collaborate on a closing rendition of "God Bless America" that promises to echo "from the

mountains to the prairies" — and, certainly, to the domed ceiling of the Eastman Theater.

The concert, billed as "Together At Last for the First Time" is an experiment of sorts for both performers, who normally appear as soloists — Williams in concert or with an orchestra, and Peters in recital or on the operatic stage. Although they have never met in person, Peters and Williams once appeared many years ago on the same segment of "The Ed Sullivan Show." This coast-to-coast collaboration has been arranged by telephone. Several weeks before the concert, Williams mailed Peters a score of his finale arrangement.

For his part, Williams — also variously known as "King of the Keyboards" and "Icon of the Ivories" — will play such proven crowd-pleasers as "Chariots of Fire" and other audience requests. He plans a segment of Chopin nocturnes, polonaises, scherzos and etudes, as well as instrumental versions of hit tunes by Stevie Wonder, Tina Turner, Hurey Lewis & the News and Billy Joel, from his recently released album, "Today My Way."

Williams, who has recently made a number of symphonic appearances and traveled widely giving solo concerts, frequently plays a new piece he calls "Concerto for Chopsticks," written on the centennial of the death of Hungarian pianist and composer Franz Liszt, whose own variations on "Chopsticks" were thrown overboard during a shipboard spat with "a lady friend," according to Williams, and were never recovered. Williams has also just completed a new album of inspirational music recorded in the Crystal Cathedral in Anaheim, Calif., for TV evangelist Robert Schuller, host of the "Hour of Power" program.

"Opera is my first love," said Robert Peters during last week's interview — yet the acclaimed coloratura soprano also enjoys singing certain types of popular music, particularly from the American theater. She plans to sing selections from Rodgers and Hammerstein, as well as Lerner and Loewe, and will also include the poignant "Memory" from the international smash hit show, "Cats." Her operatic selections will include arias from Verdi's "Rigoletto," Puccini's "Gianni Schicchi" and Lehar's "The Merry Widow."

Peters numbers among her all-time favorites "Lucia di Lammermoor," "Rigoletto" and "The Barber of Seville." Asked whether she particularly cherished her frequent role as the Queen of the Night in Mozart's "The Magic Flute" — which contains two extremely high-pitched and difficult, though mercifully brief, soprano arias — Peters replied that she relished the challenge. The role, she added, "makes the voice much more agile, enhances it. The more you use the voice — if you use it well and judiciously — the better it responds," said Peters, who added that a singer who knows what's right for his or her own voice can go on performing for many years. Peters' own distinguished 37-year career certainly attests to the wisdom of her observation.

Understandably, Peters draws the line at rock 'n' roll. "I have to be careful of what I choose (to sing)," she noted. "I want to be in

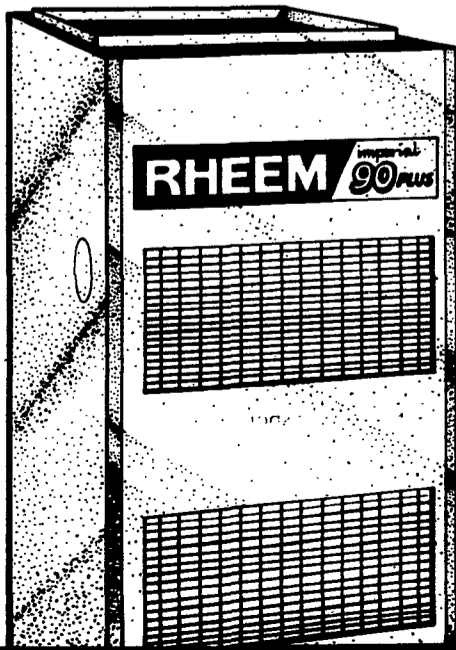
Continued on Page 13

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