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LOCAL

The Cappelli family of music

by Lucia Mauro

"We couldn't imagine life without music," states Nancy Cappelli, matriarch of an exceptionally sonorous family. In a content tone of voice that naturally equates music with breathing.

She is joined by two of her six children — pianist Jeffrey and violinist Jennifer — together with endless rows of vintage pianos at Jeffrey's piano restoration company, Renaissance Craftsmen Restoration Inc. in Forest Park. The rest of the day would encompass private piano lessons taught by Nancy at her River Forest home; and an expansive offering of music classes conducted by Jennifer and Jeffrey at the Cappelli Institute of Music, located for the past seven years in Oak Park.

With the exception of Greg, a financial analyst (who also happens to play the piano), the Cappelli siblings are professional musicians and teachers. Mark spe-

cializes in piano and organ; Kristin is a violinist. And Sarah, a pianist, enjoys an impressive career as an actress closely affiliated with Chicago's Inclusive Theatre.

Looking back at the family's history, it makes perfect sense that their lives would follow a melodious continuum of legati and vibrati. Nancy met her husband Amo at the now-closed Cosmopolitan School of Music in downtown Chicago. Nancy recalls how she was so mesmerized by pianist Amo's luxurious playing of a Chopin piece in a rehearsal room, that she burst through the door to get closer to his ethereal energy.

Amo, a name that literally means "I love," structured his entire life around music and family. Born in New York, he hailed from an artistic family distantly related to the famed musical Clemente clan of Italy. His father was an opera singer. The

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Jeffrey Cappelli at his Renaissance Craftsmen Restoration warehouse in Forest Park.

Cappelli's trace their roots to the seaside town of Ansedonia, northwest of Rome. In addition to performing, composing, and serving as a church music director, Amo opened up their River Forest home for piano and violin lessons. He has since passed away, but his spirit exists in the fingertips of every student who absorbed his respect for the classics.

Music continues to heal the Cappelli family. Nancy, who was recently diagnosed with breast cancer, spends a good part of her day teaching piano to aspiring musicians of all ages — from the same bench Amo conducted lessons nearly every day. The Cappelli's have gathered together to reach out to the larger community.

On Nov. 5, at 4 p.m., the Cappelli Institute of Music is presenting a benefit-concert for breast cancer research at Oak Park's Unity Temple, 875 Lake St. Twelve faculty members will perform works by Chopin, Mozart, Beethoven and Piazzolla. The school's chamber ensemble is featured, as well as vocal soloists. Also joining the artists are three guest speakers delivering inspirational lectures on the human condition. They are Dr. Judith Wolfman, a pathologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital; Rev. William O'Donnell; and Rabbi Gary Gerson. Cost of \$15 includes the concert and post-show reception. For more information, call (708) 445-8460.

"We had five pianos in the house, and sometimes two violins, cranking away all the time," recalls Jeffrey.

Jennifer completes his thought, "So we were definitely expected to go into music. We also were constantly exposed to great music through concerts. I knew, at the age of 5, that I wanted to play the violin after attending a concert at Orchestra Hall."

Jennifer — who holds a bachelor's and master's degree in violin performance from Indiana University — is a member of the Grant Park Symphony and a substitute for the Milwaukee and Chicago Symphony Orchestras.

Nancy likens their vibrant household to a conservatory. "There was always a cacophony of sounds," she says. "And the kids would put on mini concerts for us. The younger ones would even make their own instruments (like horns from paper-towel tubes)."

In addition, the children were involved in figure skating, tennis and other sports. Jennifer points out how the family emphasized development of "the whole person" — a philosophy she passes on to her students. Jeffrey — who obtained his bachelor's and master's degrees in piano performance from Indiana University — harbored a lifelong fascination for how pianos work. Encouraged by his father to hone a variety of skills and study piano technology, Jeffrey became an apprentice in Indiana University's piano restoration shop.

Today he is the owner and president of Renaissance Craftsmen Restoration, which for the past 20 years, has specialized in the repair, restoration and rebuilding of heir-

loom pianos and furnishings. His 14,000 square-foot facility in Forest Park resembles an Old World workshop where artisans meticulously carve wooden piano legs by hand, apply several coats of lacquers and emboss the finished products with regal gold lettering.

"This is my toy store; this is my fantasy-land," Jeffrey beams as he conducts a tour past disemboweled 100-year-old Steinways whose rusted sound systems are in the midst of shimmering transformation on a separate table. He unveils an Italian Baroque piano adorned with intricate leaf carvings and an 1875 Chickering piano made entirely of thick rosewood.

"I've had fantasies about owning a workshop like the one from [the Cremona, Italy-set film] 'The Red Violin,'" continues an

obviously enthralled Jeffrey. His appreciation for fine craftsmanship seems to ooze from every fiber as he oversees a dedicated team of craftsmen engaged in the delicate but ferociously exacting creative process.

His company recently performed a complete restoration and refinishing of a Kranich & Bach "Parlour Grand" from the late 1800s. They brought it up to contemporary speed by installing a PianoDisc digital player-piano system. According to Jeffrey, this instrument's most striking feature is the elaborately carved mahogany finish.

He notes, "We take special care of each item entrusted to us, but this kind of figure work can present a special challenge. First the old finish is stripped by hand. At this point, any damaged carving is replaced. Then comes the finishing step — a seven-coat, hand-rubbed lacquer finish."

Jeffrey explains that the PianoDisc allows a musician to capture the spirit of the traditional player pianos with the sparkling clarity of today's digital audio technology. The system does not interfere with one's ability to play the piano acoustically.

Overall, though, Jeffrey prides himself in the low-tech features of his company housed in a turn-of-the-19th-century building. He applies this personalized philosophy to the Cappelli Institute of Music.

"Our approach to teaching is an authentic one," stresses Jeffrey. "There are no gimmicks. If we're teaching new young students, we want them to learn how to count and read notes accurately and develop their ear."

"You come to understand classical music by learning to play better music over time. It becomes self-motivating. If you develop into a better player, you come to know the composer as a person and as an artist."

Jennifer equates teaching music to "transferring your emotions — you become very connected to your students."

Nancy, who is committed to sharing the timelessness of great music with future generations, tells a delightful story about a little girl who inquired about a photo of the composer Beethoven in the Cappelli household. "When I told her it was Beethoven," recounts Nancy, "the girl looked puzzled. Then she turned to me and said, 'I thought Beethoven was a dog.'"

Thankfully, we have the Cappellis to rescue us from the massive influx of pop culture and its fleeting nature.

"Classical music gives you an inner peace," says Jeffrey. "It expresses every emotion and brings you a huge measure of satisfaction."

The Cappelli Institute of Music offers private lessons for all ages, styles and levels of piano, flute, violin, viola, guitar, cello and voice. It also offers music appreciation classes, lectures by renowned musicologists and year-round concerts, and prepares students