

## Creative Creatures

*The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.*

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### **# 10 / Dr Madeline Williamson, creative director, pianist, Abiquiu, New Mexico**

The house was designed and built for two persons and lots of cats and dogs, and to perform music on the grandest of pianos. Its location is a dream, in a bend of the Chama River; its design, by Mark and Peter Anderson, innovative and eco modern architects from San Francisco, is also a dream: a well-proportioned box with several floors and mezzanines and enormous windows that open up fully to a couple of sun decks. From the house the views of the river and the surrounding mesas are spectacular enough to silence anyone, which is good, because this “Abiquiu House” (the name with which it entered the design annals) is the location of the Abiquiu Chamber Music Festival, now in its fifth year.

The festival’s setting, at the same time expansive and intimate, is a credit to its designers and their clients as well. Madeline Williamson is a professor emerita of piano music and a former music department dean at Arizona State University in Tempe, and a concert pianist; she is also the festival’s creative director. Her partner’s influence in the design of their surroundings doesn’t come as a surprise after you learn she is Danish. Birgitte Ginge, an anthropologist who published ‘Identifying Gender in the Archaeological Record: Revising Our Stereotypes’, now works at the Santa Fe Opera. She helped create the space and select the furniture; over the years, an impressive collection of contemporary design and

art was collected. There is a huge music library, and a film library, and there are a ton of books. In the Abiquiu House the liveliest conversations can be heard at all times.

I watched the house being built. Not an easy job, for in adobe-adoring northern New Mexico it was hard to find builders who understood the demands of innovative design and of clients with a profound sense of perfection. During construction, village gossip had it that the design was “inappropriate for these old Hispanic lands.” Acceptance of the house did not come fast; it did not help that Madeline and Birgitte opened it to musical performers who didn’t play the mouth organ, the fiddle, and the slide guitar. Madeline braced the critique and continued to select her own “brand” of music in an ever-changing mixture of classical and contemporary composers. Madeline’s own turf is new music. Avant garde. Strange music. Eerie even. Until you sit down and listen with your precious ears wide open.

Eventually, the house was recognized as outlandish but amazingly beautiful nevertheless; and the performances were heralded as extraordinary events the community could be proud of. People began to arrive from all over the Four Corners area and beyond and they kept coming back, and season tickets sold out quicker and quicker. Madeline’s programming is a surprise, each year again. She must have been a greatly appreciated music teacher in Phoenix, for she manages to attract divine performers to her sessions, many of them old students of hers, now professionals with a golden name of their own. I miss those Sunday afternoon concerts. I always sat on one of the steps of the stairs that lead to the living space with the grand piano, a position overlooking the ensemble as well as the dramatic scenery.

One Saturday a few years ago, I also attended a piano session where the oldest performer was I believe twelve and the youngest four or five years old. All performers were Madeline’s students, for she started her own school in nearby Los Alamos where she teaches foremost kids with Asian parents, most of whom are scientists working for the labs. I was the only stranger in the audience; the others were all proud family members of the performers. It was a joy to see, and listen to, these kids play Madeline’s grand piano. It was also eye opening to watch Madeline as she lovingly coached her excited students through their performances. I had known Madeline for quite some time, since when she was still living in Phoenix, but had mostly met with the tough intellectual who always has a straightforward opinion and never hesitates at sending you her message smack in the face. I couldn’t see her as a tender and caring “aunt” who with a most delicate touch patiently coaches young children. I think differently now.

Come to think of it, I should have known Madeline has a sweet aunt inside her: she and Birgitte had their Abiquiu House designed in such a way that they would be able to offer a home to a whole regiment of dogs. They have adopted many—and they were adopted themselves by scores of stray dogs that “knocked on their door” apparently sensing they’d find a warm welcome. Madeline and Birgitte have nurtured many a hurt dog back to good health, and caringly attended others during their last days. Their dogs have their own comfortable quarters below the actual home, where they find a peaceful playground and can fully enjoy the harmonious classical or intriguing avant-garde sounds penetrating their habitat from above.