

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Good-Will Ambassadors

Group Exports Chamber Music Worldwide

By BRIAN WISE

FOR Eleanor Valkenburg, the thrill of chamber music comes from performing for underserved audiences in far-flung corners of the globe, be it a church in Tunisia, a music school in Syria or a castle in the Czech Republic.

Ms. Valkenburg, who lives in Huntington, is the founding artistic director of Poetica Musica, a chamber music group that for 20 years has kept one foot on Long Island and another overseas. In the United States, the group has a continuing residency at Old Westbury Gardens, where it will perform on April 8 as part of its annual concert series.

Abroad, the group works regularly with foreign embassies and consulates, as well as with the State Department, to present concerts in locations that other chamber groups overlook or avoid.

"We love wild and woolly places because it's really where you communicate," said Ms. Valkenburg, a soprano. "When you're playing American music for the first time for people, and people react, it's incredible. It's also wonderful to listen to their music."

The group's international mission requires its members — a core of five professional musicians from the New York City area and several international guests — to develop skills that other musicians do not usually need.

For instance, Ms. Valkenburg said, she can sing in 18 languages and has translated Copland's "Old American Songs" into languages like Polish and Arabic. Barry Crawford, the group's longtime flutist, once par-

ticipated in a jam session with local musicians in Syria. The members all view touring as a chance to discover repertory and make contacts with foreign artists.

"Ellie's concept is to make it as much of a cultural exchange and a good-will endeavor as a chamber music series," said Eugene Moye, the group's cellist, who also plays principal cello in the American Symphony Orchestra. "It sounds corny, but it's about the universality of music."

Ms. Valkenburg formed Poetica Musica in 1986 as the resident ensemble at the Heckscher Museum of Art in Huntington. In its early days, the group provided musical programs to complement art exhibits.

While visiting Prague in 1990, Ms. Valkenburg discovered a whole new market for musicians opening up, providing opportunities beyond the traditional circuit of American and Western European concert halls. She began contacting festivals and sites in the Czech Republic, which led her to Poland, Turkey, Hungary, the Balkans and elsewhere.

The group has maintained strong ties to the Czech Republic, particularly since 1997, when it held fund-raising concerts to help restore a Baroque theater in the castle at Cesky Krumlov. The theater, which contained original stage machinery and sets, had fallen into disrepair and had been closed for 30 years. Poetica Musica will return to the Czech Republic in April, after performing at the Czech Embassy in Washington.

Another breakthrough for Poetica Musica came four years ago, when the State Department sponsored its tour to Damascus, Homs and Lattakia, Syria. The musicians



Ruby Washington/The New York Times

Eleanor Valkenburg, right, artistic director of Poetica Musica, rehearsing with Susan Walters and Eugene Moye. The group has performed in far-flung places, including Croatia and Tunisia.

presented concerts and conducted master classes for students at Syria's major conservatory.

"We were terrified to go to the Middle East, because we weren't sure how they were going to react to us," Ms. Valkenburg said. "Musically it was the most incredibly wonderful experience, that I can't even put it into words. The music transcended any political differences and any ethnic differences, because it's communication."

State Department musical tours date to the 1950's and 60's, when the agency sent prominent jazz musicians like Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie to international hot spots. The opera singer Marian Anderson

and even rock bands like Blood, Sweat and Tears traveled on behalf of the government as well. Funds for the tours declined in the 1970's, but they were revived after the terrorist attacks in 2001.

"The State Department should have a big say in presenting music, because it puts a very human face on Americans," Ms. Valkenburg said. "It shows that we are sensitive, literate, artistic people. And that's very important."

Ms. Valkenburg said her mission abroad is to provide exposure for American composers. Poetica Musica presented all-American programs of Copland, Bernstein, Barber, Rorem and Gershwin on its 2002 trip to

Tunisia and in a 2004 visit to Serbia, Croatia, Slovakia and Bulgaria.

In turn, the group asks foreign musicians to bring their native music to Old Westbury. "If we have someone coming over from Serbia, we want them to play Serbian music," Ms. Valkenburg said.

Irene Krarup, the cultural attaché at the Danish Consulate in New York, said that Poetica Musica had sought out partnerships with musicians, especially in smaller foreign countries "with limited visibility on the New York music scene."

"This is very unusual," she said. "Ellie Valkenburg takes pride in making the cultural exchange work on also a personal level — making the visiting musicians feel home in New York."

With the rewards of touring come risks.

Ms. Valkenburg recalls leaving her wallet, containing several thousand dollars given to her by the State Department, in a taxi in Syria. Moments after she arrived

at her hotel and realized what had happened, the taxi driver showed up with the wallet and the cash. And after finishing a musicians' seminar in Pakrac, Croatia, she was warned about the threat of land mines nearby.

Next month, Poetica Musica will present a concert at St. Joseph's Church in Greenwich Village, the first of a series in New York City — despite a supply-and-demand picture that has been more favorable on Long Island and abroad.

"We were very reluctant to come to New York because we felt there was already so much stuff going on there," Ms. Valkenburg said. "Now it's like being a little fish in a big pool. We waited quite a bit until we had a lot under our belts."