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Brandon plans new center for the arts

The new Compass Music and Arts Center aims to bring music as well as literary, performing and visual arts to Brandon, with programming and events to begin in April 2013

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by Stephen Sutton

I moved to Vermont in 2009 to set up a branch of my classical music record label, Divine Art Recordings, and my wife Edna and I were very lucky (or fated?) to come across the vacated Warren Kimble studio and gallery in Brandon at a time when we had just sold my business in England. We have known and loved Vermont for over 14 years and have admired and enjoyed the rich culture of arts so evident in the state. We were then able to expand the business and open an English Tearoom (now a full daytime restaurant) in which customers could hear our large selection of CDs and also browse our gift shop; we also opened a small gallery featuring the paintings of highly talented local artists, and began to host live music. We now hold the only regular weekly jazz concerts in the state featuring the best of New York and Boston talent, which are attracting appreciative audiences from far and near.

In 2011 we were avidly searching for a shopfront or storage facility around Brandon and purely by chance (or fate again?) came across “Building K” at the former Brandon Training School — long vacant, stripped and derelict, but with much evidence of its former use as an infirmary and special school.

The building seemed far too big and unsuitable for us of course, but Edna and I walked around separately and both of us immediately saw an enormous potential, that — with a lot of work, commitment and finance — could be realized. So the concept of the Compass Music and Arts Center (CMAC) was born.

We had originally hoped to open the first phase of the center in April 2012 but due to the amount of renovation work required we would have to be patient. Now we hope to move our offices into the Compass Center in October, along with a small store, coffee shop and visitor information room. The former school dining hall will be used for concerts (seating 250) but also will be suitable for dance classes, installation art and community events. Alongside our commercial offices, we hope to build a professional recording studio. Also moving in will be our Phonograph Room, a small working museum of vintage phonographs (“record players”) which will grow to encompass historic radios and TVs to demonstrate the evolution of recorded music in the home from the 1890s to the 1970s.

Our overall vision for the center is to provide a focus where people of all ages and all abilities can experience, celebrate, share in and learn about all of the performing and visual arts, and where there will also be a great deal of cross-disciplinary inspiration so we’ll have music in the art galleries and art in the music areas, and ‘experience rooms’ which might contain various types of multimedia displays. We want the Compass Music and Arts Center above all to be a place of

activity, not just a gallery or museum. Included in the proposals for the development will be studios for painters, photographers and sculptors (and other creative work such as weaving); a good deal of gallery and display space and an outside sculpture gallery; suites for music teaching and music therapy; regular activities around poetry and creative writing; rehearsal rooms for musicians (from professional pianists to local school rock bands); a traditional photography center; a jazz lounge and bar; and a bistro café for visitors. Above all our wish is to involve the local and wider community at all levels from young children enjoying drum or harp classes right up to internationally famed musicians and artists. So far, the response has been excellent.

To support and fund educational and art-development programs, a new non-profit corporation has been set up, called Compass Music and Arts Foundation, Inc. The Foundation is currently looking for three more directors with experience of grant writing, major fund raising and nonprofit /arts center management to join the team. The published mission statement of the Foundation declares that it is “dedicated to enriching life through a deeper appreciation of music and the literary, performing and visual arts.” The Board of Directors hope that in achieving these aims the Foundation, in supporting the Compass Center, will add substantially to the already rich cultural heritage in Vermont.

It is intended to open the Center’s initial phase and visitor room during October, and the official launch with major events is to be programmed for April 2013. Information and news will be supplied at our website www.cmacvt.org or via the existing Brandon Music Café and Store at 62 Country Club Road, Brandon (info@brandon-music.net).