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New school in Kendall offers serious instruction for music students

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Al Diaz / Miami Herald Staff

HARMONIOUS COUPLE: William Villaverde and Fabiana Claire, co-founders of Superior Academy of Music, open the new studio facility Monday.

As one note leads into another to make a melody, music has drawn Fabiana Claire and William Villaverde together to make a marriage.

Now, Claire, 30, a University of Miami Frost School of Music doctoral grad, and Villaverde, 33, a doctoral candidate, want to expand their love of music to the community.

On Monday, the South Miami pair will open the Superior Academy of Music (SAM) in Kendall's Greenery Mall. The multi-studio facility, with soundproof booths, five Kawai pianos and sound-isolating furniture, will be dedicated to a musical arts program with

group and private lessons. Students will receive instruction in classical, jazz and popular music on numerous instruments and voice from a staff of 11 drawn largely from the masters and doctoral programs at Frost.

All of the instructors, who include classical and jazz pianists, jazz and classical singers and two violinists, maintain active careers at the national and international level — as do pianists Claire and Villaverde.

That's vital, Claire says, for students "to have a role model." In addition, "We think it's crucial to complete the process. You can spend hours practicing and polishing your craft, but it's not complete unless it's presented to an audience."

However, both say that SAM isn't only for the next Yo-Yo Ma or Midori or even Lady Gaga.

"We could have people that want to learn just for fun," Villaverde says. These students will learn how to use their voice or play an instrument properly to save themselves from potential pain later.

"If you sing without proper technique, you can mess up your voice," Villaverde explains. "If

you play the piano with incorrect posture you can mess up your hands and arms pretty bad. It's all about being trained in a healthy way."

But for those who expect to go on to college and careers, SAM has an accreditation program to prepare participants. The Carnegie Hall-Royal Conservatory Achievement Program, a joint initiative between New York's Carnegie Hall and The Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, guides students through various levels of musical achievement and is geared toward pre-college musicians. SAM instructors will use that curriculum.

"We've seen incoming freshman have deficiencies and they lose scholarship opportunities," Claire says. The program is aimed at giving young magnet school-, college- and career-bound musicians an edge and clear understanding of music theory and technique.

"Canada has a national standard for music; we don't," says Claire, who is Chicago-born but has studied music in Dallas and Charleston as well as Cuba (where she met her Cuban-born husband 14 years ago) and her parents' native Bolivia. The program's curriculum creates a standardized system to help students measure their progress and have a goal to aim for before venturing down a competitive college admissions path.

Villaverde adds that pre-college training can be "essential to get scholarships."

As scholarship students at the UM, Claire and Villaverde became the first husband and wife to consecutively win the university's annual Concerto Competition. Claire won in 2008 as a piano soloist. Villaverde won in the same capacity in 2009.

Frost Dean Shelton Berg applauds the school's selection of the Carnegie-Royal Conservatory program for those who aspire to study music. "It's based on benchmarks and verification levels. It's a great idea to know what you are shooting for."

Berg also says a serious music instruction facility in Miami could be a boon for the community and the university as it considers college-bound applicants.

"It's very important because they have a philosophy of teaching music that is very comprehensive. [Students] are not only going to learn an instrument but they will learn music history and ear-training, and that's what we train in our school," Berg says.

While pursuing their education and performing, the couple, who have been married for seven years, taught students privately out of their South Miami home. The new venue, naturally, will afford them more space to teach groups of about 10 students per class.

"We believe music is something everyone should have access to, whether you have talent or not," Claire says. "It's something that can be developed and anyone can try and grow."

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