Armen Donelian is fluent in the language of jazz

By DAVID LEE

Armen Donelian sits at his Steinway grand piano, dips his fingers into the keys and brings out a stately rendition of a John Philip Sousa march.

“Jazz,” says Donelian, “combines the African traditions of rhythm and blues with European traditions such as this Sousa march.”

As he speaks, he transforms the march chords with syncopation and melody into Scott Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag.”

Donelian, a pianist, arranger and author, has taught at the New School for over 20 years. A thoroughly professional musician in performance, he is equally patient and comfortable in his Greenport studio talking about the most basic principles of his discipline with a relative neophyte.

“Jazz is oral and aural,” he says. “Until musicians were advanced enough to write notes, music was transmitted orally on the bandstand in performance. So much of what they played was informed by what they heard going on.”

Explaining the process of jazz improvisation, Donelian compared it to language: “We use the tools of language, grammar and vocabulary to express ourselves in the moment, and jazz musicians do the same, using melody, harmony, rhythm and composing spontaneously.”

In July Donelian was preparing for the 10th anniversary session of the Hudson Jazz Workshop, a four-day musical retreat he conducts with his co-artistic director, tenor saxophonist and bandleader Marc Mommaas. Each summer about 10 students take up residence in the Donelian home, situated amid fields and orchards in Greenport. They receive the undivided attention of the two teachers, and of the third member of the HJW Board of Directors, Rose Caldwell, who, in addition to being married to Donelian, is the HJW gourmet chef, travel agent and general manager of affairs.

Donelian and Mommaas met in 2000 at the Manhattan School of Music and did a memorial concert after 9/11. Since then they have played duets and concerts and made a duo recording on Sunnyside Records. In 2007 they started the HJW. Mommaas also conducts his own New York Jazz Workshop in Queens, where he lives.

Workshop students are at an advanced level of proficiency with their instruments. This year students from Nigeria and Denmark join local musicians. They play a variety of instruments, except for drums, because of space limitations.

The workshop convenes Thursday evening, August 11. For the next two days work continues from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. with a focus on duets, trios and small group improvisation.

The workshop culminates with a public performance, with a guest musician and art-