New Hampshire Chamber Music Center to be Honored by CMA

by Ellen Goldensohn

Apple Hill Chamber Music Center, in Nelson NH, was founded in 1971 as a summer chamber music workshop on a site that used to be a hundred-acre farm. Almost 45 years later, Apple Hill is pretty much a year round enterprise, locally rooted, yet with international reach. "For nine months, we go out into the world," says violist Leonard (Lenny) Matczynski, the center’s director, "and for three months, we invite the world here."

Matczynski started teaching in Apple Hill’s summer program in the early 1980s, when he lived in Boston. From the beginning, the center’s philosophy resonated with him. "Back when I was in school," he says, "I used to go to Aspen and other fancy, incredible programs. But when I came to Apple Hill, I was struck by the fact that everyone was accepted here, no matter what their level or age.

"You’d teach all day, and you’d have to perform, too. But I never felt nervous. Like Emmanuel Music [in Boston], it always felt like home here."

Today, the educational mission remains central, and the founders’ philosophy lives on. During the summer, Matczynski, the string quartet members, and visiting faculty coach musicians of all ages, levels, and cultures. Participants are placed in chamber music groups by ability rather than age.

Socially the program resembles one aspect of the Marlboro model, in that musicians, staff, their spouses and children share meals, chores and social events.

During the rest of the year, the Apple Hill String Quartet—Elise Kuder and Colleen Jennings, violins; Michael Kelley, viola; and Rupert Thompson, cello—along with Matczynski and other artists, play a local concert series and conduct mini-residencies in communities, schools and universities around its home base—the Monadnock Mountain region of southwestern New Hampshire.

Apple Hill’s Playing for Peace program, initiated decades ago by pianist Eric Stumacher and violinist Phillip Levy (among others), travels abroad.

"Playing for Peace goes to countries in conflict," explains Matczynski. Over the years, it has paired youthful Republic of Ireland music students with their counterparts from Northern Ireland; Israelis with Arabs; Greek with Turkish Cypriots; and—most recently—Syrians and Israelis. Creating student ensembles of mixed nationalities—often the only common language is the music itself—the center has fostered understanding across ethnic and religious barriers, frequently creating the first contact participants have ever had with someone from an "opposing" group. The center also offers scholarships that bring Playing for Peace participants to summer sessions in New Hampshire.

Like Lenny Matczynski, bassoonist/composer John Steinmetz was a coach at Apple Hill beginning in the 1980s, when many of the founders were still involved. "Apple Hill was started at the height of the counter culture," Steinmetz remembers.

"The founders all moved to New Hampshire. It was 'Back to the Land'—plus chamber music."

"I always felt very much at home there," he adds. "The musical emphasis was on the expressive side—communicative and emotional.

There was a hierarchy of quality—you weren’t more valued if you could play better. What has survived is a supportive non-competitive environment, a belief that everyone, of whatever age or ability, deserves to be respected and heard."

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