Spotlight Interview: Ealain McMullin, violin

How did you first become involved with Apple Hill?

It all began with attending a thrilling concert at a secluded, lakeside manor in the enchanted forests of County Donegal, thanks to an indefatigable music teacher named Sister Concepta!

Donegal is truly one of the most beautiful places in the world. It has an incredible history of traditional Irish folk music, but it is a remote part of the country and access to chamber music was very limited. Opportunities to study chamber music were fewer still. So when the news arrived that Apple Hill was going to visit Donegal on one of their first tours to Ireland and Northern Ireland, Sister Concepta sprang into action, recruiting students from all over the county, loading us all onto a bus to experience the Apple Hill workshop. I was about twelve and so the specifics of that first workshop are a little fuzzy now, but I do remember roaring fireplaces, infinite supplies of tea and biscuits, music-filled rooms at the tops of narrow staircases and the aforementioned bus getting stuck on the dirt road. I also remember getting my first introduction to playing chamber music with an early Mozart quartet. I definitely recall being totally bowled over when we got to hear our coaches play Schubert. There was also a feeling that I had got a little taste of something, and I wanted more! After that, the workshops became a hugely anticipated highlight on the calendar for myself and my friends. Growing up with those annual workshops was so special and of course, I couldn’t have predicted the path-altering impact it would have.

In the years since, I’ve been lucky enough to participate in many other dimensions of Apple Hill. In 2002, I attended my first Summer Chamber Music Workshop in NH. That environment opened up a whole new world of possibility and experience. After a few years coming in the summers, I had the opportunity to do a year-long Playing for Peace scholarship at Keene State College, where I studied with Apple Hill resident musicians Elise Kuder, violin, and Mike Kelley, viola. That was an incredible year in so many ways - it totally clarified the role that I wanted music to have in my life. I got to share that year with Reem Abu-Rahmeh, an Apple Hill student from Jordan, who also happened to be the first person I’d met at Apple Hill in 2002— we were on the same taxi from the airport. It was that year that I decided one of my next goals was to study with Apple Hill Director Lenny Matczynski at the Boston Conservatory where I completed my graduate studies. In recent summers, it has been such a huge honor to be invited as a faculty member at the Summer Workshop.
I’ve been incredibly lucky to wear so many different hats at Apple Hill. It’s become a core part of my life. This place is really a home away from home.

What do you do now?

I am the director and co-founder of the Newport String Project, a chamber music performance and youth mentoring program in Rhode Island. Our goal is to explore how musicians can play a public service role through artistry, education, and social justice. For us, this exploration takes the form of a chamber music concert series which features performances in traditional and non-traditional spaces throughout Newport. Alongside our concerts, the project also features an intensive educational program which provides free after-school lessons in violin, viola, and cello to 40 students. The project began in 2012 as a tributary of Community MusicWorks, a fantastic organization that is very important to me and which has a strong connection with Apple Hill. This year, we’ve welcomed two new teaching artists who are alumni of Community MusicWorks—Jessenia Grijalva, violin, and AlexisMarie Nelson, viola. And Jacob MacKay, cello, has joined the project as a resident musician. Jessenia, AlexisMarie, and Jacob are all Apple Hill alumni. It has been so lovely to feel the blend of all of these influences coming together.

How has what you learned at Apple Hill influenced you today?

I’ve been so fortunate that my involvement with Apple Hill led to a connection with Community MusicWorks and now my work with the Newport String Project—so it has been a huge influence on my path as a musician.

I think one of the ideas I take away from Apple Hill is that we all have the capacity to participate in the work of making the world a more inclusive and equitable place. And that idea feels more relevant than ever. At Apple Hill, music is the tool to explore this notion. Navigating the intense process of learning, rehearsing, and performing a piece of chamber music is a really rich environment to practice the skills needed to connect and find common ground with other people.

What are some of your favorite Apple Hill memories?

Well, I met my husband Jesse at Apple Hill and so when the time came to plan our wedding party, there was really only one place we wanted to do it. So, of course, getting married by the Apple Hill bell, surrounded by an incredible group of family and friends holds a particularly important place.

There are so many things that I look forward to doing at Apple Hill every summer—driving up Apple Hill road at the beginning of the session (still gives me goosebumps), amazing conversations with incredible people on the porch, gazebo sunsets, gathering in to listen to the groups perform after meals, dancing with wild abandon on Tuesdays, sitting in the barn and imagining all the music those walls have absorbed—it’s a really long list. I think each year, those
rituals hold lots of old memories and also generate lots of wonderful new ones because you’re always sharing them with both longtime friends and new friends.

One special memory is my first evening at Apple Hill in 2002. It was late and pouring rain. I scrambled down the hill with my suitcase and made it safely to Cabin I and was settling in to fall asleep. The rain was pounding on the roof of the cabin and the sound of the faculty rehearsing Verklärte Nacht was sweeping down the hill, and I thought, what magical paradise have I been transported to?! Even before I knew all that Apple Hill would come to mean to me, I felt at ease, peaceful and at home there, from the very first day.

**What is it like to play with the Apple Hill String Quartet, your former teachers and mentors?**

It’s been such a meaningful, energizing and inspiring week. Over the years, the Apple Hill Quartet has inspired countless people—all over the world—and this week, I have been feeling especially thankful for them as people and as artists, and their boundless commitment to making Apple Hill an extraordinary place for all of us to grow, thrive, and be inspired.