

The Tree

By Betty Hauck

Founding member of Apple Hill and violist-in-residence, 1973-1995

It was love at first sight, but it's not what you're thinking. I fell in love with a place, not a person. It was the summer of 1971 and I was heading up to spend a month teaching and performing at a summer music camp for the first time. Not knowing what to expect I drove up the dirt road in Nelson, NH towards this place that was called Apple Hill - the road was a narrow one, winding and hilly, with beautiful old maple trees on either side. It had taken me about two hours to get here from my apartment in Cambridge and this dirt road was the last two miles of the trip. I was twenty-five years old and I was both excited and nervous. I finally rounded the last bend in the road and was greeted by a sight that took my breath away - it was the most beautiful place I had ever seen! It's true, I fell in love. How can I describe that first sight of Apple Hill with the majestic elm tree towering over all, the view over-looking the hills of Vermont, the antique yellow cape and the red barns and sugar house? It was magical! At that moment I had the strange sensation of a voice whispering in my ear that I would be here as long as the tree was. This made no sense at the time since I had come up to teach for only a month, but somehow I had a feeling that my life had changed forever – and it had!

Over time our music camp grew and several of us, teachers and musicians, eventually chose to live at Apple Hill year-round. In the fall of 1973 I moved from Cambridge to Apple Hill and lived there for the next 17 years. Our camp prospered over the years, but sad was the day when we learned that our welcoming, sheltering elm tree that was at the center of Apple Hill was dying. Some of the branches were already being held in place by chains. (One of our students even wrote a song which has a line in it about trees in chains.) We tried all kinds of ways to keep it alive. Advisors told us what we needed to do. I remember going around and poking holes in the ground with a long and heavy steel pole and filling the holes with fertilizer to try to help keep the tree going, but every year the tree grew fewer and fewer leaves.

Finally one year the tree didn't have any leaves at all...it was dead. It still made a beautiful silhouette against the sky and we planned to leave it standing; however, the president of the Apple Hill board was a lawyer and he said that we had to take the tree down because of the danger and the liability. And of course, we did not want anyone to be hurt by dead branches falling on their heads!

But was there some way we could honor the tree and preserve its spirit? It was going to have to be cut down, but what to do about the stump? It was a huge stump. (At one point someone had told us that this elm might be the oldest living tree in New Hampshire.) There are people who do sculptures with chain saws – usually standing figures like bears - and there was some talk about hiring one of these artists to make a sculpture out of the remaining stump. Another group of people felt that the stump should be saved and that a gazebo should be built on top of it; however, several of us thought that a gazebo was a terrible idea - it was too cutesy. I thought that we should just leave the stump and that it would be a good place for people to sit. There was a lot of debate about all of these suggestions.

Sadly and inevitably the time finally came for the tree to be taken down. During one of the camp sessions that summer a bassoon coach named John Steinmetz came up with an idea of a meaningful way to say farewell to the tree. We all liked his suggestion and this is what we did: we had a goodbye ceremony where everyone who was there at the time, every student and teacher, was invited to read a poem, make up a song, play a piece of music, or contribute some other heartfelt gift to wish our tree farewell. Some of the students had written poems. Freddie Ortiz, a violinist from Cochabamba, Bolivia, and I and two of our friends played a slow movement from a Mozart string quartet, dedicating it to the tree.

I read a Shakespeare sonnet about a meaningful friendship that uses a tree as a metaphor. It begins:

*That time of year thou mayst in me behold,
When yellow leaves or few or none do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.*

I loved that beautiful phrase, *Bare ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang*. The poem seemed so fitting for the tree because it is about friendship and dying and saying goodbye to a dear old friend. I was unprepared for the strong emotion that welled up in me as I read the sonnet and I started to get choked up. I was completely caught off-guard - I had no idea that I would be so affected by saying farewell to a tree and I fought to keep the tears back. Although my voice wavered I was able to get to the end of the poem without breaking down.

*"This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long."*

As we paid tribute to the tree, the sun went down and the sky gradually darkened. Each of us had brought a flashlight (we needed these at Apple Hill to get around at night), and we all took our flashlights out and turned them on. As we made a circle around the tree, we lit up the base of the tree and then very slowly our flashlight beams followed the trunk of the tree as it went up and up, up into the branches, to the whole top of the tree. All of the branches of the tree were brilliantly lit up by the beams of our flashlights and it looked magnificent! We gazed at this awesome sight for a few moments, then we all said, "Goodbye, tree," and turned our flashlights off, and it was suddenly pitch dark. It gives me shivers to this day when I think about it.

Later in that fall a group of young people came to take the tree down. The job was tricky because there were buildings so close by. The young people climbed the tree, they sawed the smaller branches off, then took the bigger branches off and last they attacked the main trunk. They lassoed it with ropes. They cut the tree so that when it was brought down, it wouldn't hit any buildings, but fell diagonally across the road. It was an awesome sight to see the giant tree lying there on the ground. It looked like some powerful force of nature which had tragically been brought down – it reminded me of a beached whale lying stranded and dead on the sand.

A fairly tall and large part of the stump was left. Pieces of the trunk were sliced up and put in a circle around the main stump. It was a good place to sit and hang out. We called this area Stumphenge. But the slices of the tree eventually rotted away. We burned the wood in the wood-burning furnace which was in the

basement of the kitchen of our winterized rehearsal barn. But then we were told that that was not a good idea because the smoke of the infected tree might infect other trees, so we stopped burning the wood.

The debate about what should finally happen to the stump went on. One of our students, a violinist named Julie whom we had known for many years, and her friend, Rosy, really liked the idea of building a gazebo on the stump. They started fund-raising for this purpose and found someone to make a design for a gazebo and with their vision and enthusiasm behind the project the gazebo was eventually built. There was a nice staircase going up to the gazebo and Julie planted a garden around the base of the tree. Once it was built, those of us who had been against the idea of a gazebo decided it wasn't so bad after all. It was a beautiful place to sit and look over the hills of Vermont and have private conversations.

Not long after the gazebo was built, a flutist from New York named Deva and her friend, Ron, came to Apple Hill. Ron was a psychic. He had some interesting things to say about what he was sensing when he was near the tree. He said, "You know...this is very, very unusual here. Every tree has a spirit, and with most trees when they die or are killed their spirit goes away. What is so unusual here is that although this tree has been taken down, the spirit of the tree is still there, hovering over the stump." My good friend Lenny, a fellow violist and one of the guest faculty members, and I had both originally been reluctant about having the gazebo built. We asked Ron if the gazebo's being there would chase the spirit away. "On the contrary," he said, "look at all of these people, and especially the little children, who are being drawn to the gazebo like a magnet. The children are either running up and down the stairs or playing together at the foot of the stump or in the gazebo itself." (We often had faculty children running around during the summer, playing together and having a wonderful time.) We told him about the goodbye ceremony and he said, "Well, I am really not at all surprised. That seems like such a natural and appropriate thing to do because the spirit of this tree is so strong, it would inspire such a ceremony." I thought about years before when I drove up the road to Apple Hill for the first time and fell so in love when I saw the tree and the house and the barns and the view looking over to Vermont, thinking that it was the most beautiful place I had ever seen.

And remembering the premonition I had had then, I asked myself, "Was it the spirit of the tree that whispered in my ear, *You will be here as long as I am here?*"