

Fiddles, Pianos and the Pursuit of Happiness

“I spent my whole life wanting to be a concertmaster,” says Adam DeGraff. At Rice University’s Shepherd School of Music, he had studied with Raphael Fliegel, the principal violinist of the Houston Symphony and a teacher who was, DeGraff says, “famous for turning concertmasters out.” By his mid-20s, DeGraff had landed a concertmaster post at the Richmond Symphony. He was on track for a major orchestral career.

as the jobs got bigger and better.” Hackman’s advice: “You need to be a soloist or a chamber music player to be happy.”

The conversation changed everything. In 2003, DeGraff quit his job and moved with his wife to a farm in Lewisburg, West Virginia. His career prospects were uncertain. But he had heard about a great ragtime pianist, Lynn Wright, who had just moved to Lewisburg to retire; when he saw Wright at the local Walmart, he introduced himself: “Are you the pianist? I’m the violinist.” Wright’s response was, “So what?” but he nonetheless agreed to get together for a jam session, “just for fun.” The “fun” turned into **Pianafiddle**, a free-ranging, improvisatory piano/violin duo. Wright put his retirement on hold—and

DeGraff embarked on the next chapter of his life.

The idea caught on almost immediately. Audiences responded to Pianafiddle’s eclectic mix—embracing everything from jazz to blues to pop standards and the classics—and so did presenters. In 2008–09, for instance, the duo played 200 concerts (including 93 gigs booked through the Nashville-based tour producers Live On Stage), and logged 50,000 miles on the road. Rather than stay away from his wife and small children for nine months a year, DeGraff has bought a tour bus so they can come on the road with him.

Then, during the past year, Wright finally decided to go back to his original plan—that is to say, he retired. DeGraff found a new partner in Randy Morris, a jazz and ragtime pianist and a 38-year veteran of Walt Disney World. Morris has picked up right where Wright left off, and the newly configured Pianafiddle even played its first international engagement this year: a concert at the Delphic Games in Jeju, South Korea.

The distance that DeGraff has traveled on the road is remarkable. But even more so is his personal journey. It has taken him a long way from his initial goal of becoming a top orchestral player, but helped him achieve a lot more personal fulfillment. “Anyone doing what they love and finding success,” DeGraff says, “is lucky.” www.pianafiddle.com



PURSuing
HAPPINESS:
RANDY MORRIS
AND
ADAM DEGRAFF
OF PIANAFIDDLE

Only one problem: he didn’t like the work. Harvard sociologist J. Richard Hackman uncovered the problem. Hackman, who was working with the orchestra as a consultant on organizational psychology, asked DeGraff, “Are you happy?” The answer was an unfortunate, but resounding, “No.”

“He asked me: ‘What do you think is going to happen?’” DeGraff says. “I said that I hoped to move to bigger and better concertmaster opportunities, and he said, ‘That’s what I *thought* you were going to say.’ He showed me that job satisfaction *decreased*

Stepping Up

The idea came to Mark Wait, the president of the **Blair School of Music**, in the shower. “So many music schools are essentially maintaining a museum function,” he explains. “Their mission is centered on the preservation of art music, but relatively few take an interest in the *creation* of art music.” Wait’s brainstorm: a commissioning program for Blair’s resident chamber ensembles. The result is *The Blair Commissions: Music for the 21st Century*, a series of three new pieces, funded by the Turner Family Foundation.

Blair is a relatively young institution: founded in 1964 as a pre-college program, its collegiate program only dates from 1986. It has earned a solid reputation, but its profile is inevitably less pronounced than that of some of the country’s older music schools. The commissioning program, among its other qualities, is a way of boosting the school’s visibility. “As a school we’re still evolving,” Wait says. “This is a manifestation of that.”

Each of the ensembles involved got to choose a composer. Last season, the Blair Woodwind Quintet premiered Peter Schickele’s *A Year in the Catskills*. For this year’s commission, the **Blakemore Trio**, Blair’s resident piano trio, turned to composer/soprano Susan Botti. “Susan has a very innovative ear—that’s what drew us to her at first,” explains Felix Wang, the Blakemore’s cellist. “Since she’s a singer herself, her music has that vocal sound to it—as a cellist, I gravitate toward that.”

The commission included funding for Botti to visit Nashville and “workshop”—getting to know the players and exploring their capabilities. “When I first went down there, to hear and meet them, I had some basic reactions that really made an imprint and shaped the way I heard the piece,” Botti says. “I heard some virtuosic

playing! When you get players who are so great, then you pull out all the stops—you don’t have to hold back anything.”

The resulting piece, *Gates of Silence*, is a grouping of three compositions, totaling 45–50 minutes: a violin/piano duo, a piano trio, then a work for piano trio plus soprano. Each can be played individually, but as a triptych, they form (in Botti’s words) “an overriding arch.” All three pieces were inspired by Virgil’s *Aeneid*, with the last one a setting of Linda Gregerson’s poem “Dido Refuses to Speak.” At the premiere performances, Botti herself is the soprano soloist.

After the February 19 premiere at Vanderbilt, the trio and Botti are taking the work to Merkin Concert Hall for a March 13 performance. Funding for the additional concert is build into the commissioning program. “Most world premieres end up being the sole performance,” says Wait. “We wanted at least two performances.” (For its part, the Blair Woodwind Quintet used the additional funding to make a CD of the new work and other pieces by Schickele.)

Says Wang of Blair’s commissioning program: “It shows our determination to step up to the elite schools of music. This is a great time to be at this place.” www.vanderbilt.edu/Blair
www.vanderbilt.edu/blakemoretrio

THE BLAKEMORE TRIO: CELLIST FELIX WANG, VIOLINIST CAROLYN HUEBL, AND PIANIST AMY DORFMAN.



Home Cooking

Tony Falco grew up with music. His father was a jazz bassist, and he himself spent his school years playing in rock bands. Performing is long behind him—he is now head of Environmental Labworks, a water-testing lab. But music is still very much

The Falcon right in town, turning a 19th-century button factory into near-replica of the original barn setting.

Everything else has remained pretty much the same. The Falcon's audience is made up largely of locals, but the performers are distinctly cosmopolitan. Many come from New York City, seventy miles south, drawn by the venue and the audience. "It's different from a New York audience—more relaxed," says Falco. "There's relatively little criticism." Another attraction is the home-cooked meals: before each concert, the musicians sit down with Falco and his family for a pasta dinner, or a big platter of paella (Falco's own specialty).

Another element that has remained decidedly unchanged is Falcon Arts's remarkable financial approach. The club has a donation box by the door; everybody is expected to give something, but the amount is left to the discretion of the individual. At the end of the evening, Falco hands over the contents of the box to the performers. He doesn't take a penny himself.

"Our society doesn't support the arts adequately," Falco says. "People become professional musicians and struggle for it; they can't afford health care, houses, families. I've made it a mission to support living artists."

The new Falcon launched in December with a concert by saxophonist David Liebman, a veteran of the former venue. "I was down at jazz convention and [Liebman] said: 'Tony, I've been looking for you—I want to do another gig.' 'Do you remember the place?' He said: 'I don't remember the place—I remember the *paella*.'"

www.liveatthefalcon.com



THE FALCON ARTS VENUE IN
MARLBORO, NEW YORK

a part of Falco's life: ever since 2001, his organization, **Falcon Arts**, has brought elite jazz performers to the small Hudson Valley town of Marlboro, New York.

To call the Falcon Arts venue "homespun" would be an understatement. In fact, up until this season, its concerts were staged immediately behind Falco's house, in a barn—called "The Falcon"—that he built with lumber from an old church that he had dismantled in town. Under pressure, he moved the enterprise away from his backyard. "I had the blessing of the town—but not a couple of neighbors," Falco says. Ever resourceful, he has opened a new version of

Marathon Men

Morton Feldman's six-hour-long String Quartet No. 2 presents a unique challenge for its performers. Even the intrepid Kronos Quartet, which premiered the work, was forced to cancel a Lincoln Center Festival performance in 1996. But **Flux Quartet**, the New York-based new-music ensemble—just named 2010 ensemble-in-residence at Brooklyn's Bargemusic—has made "FSQ2" into something of a specialty, performing the piece about once a year.

The work tests the limits of the ensemble's physical and mental stamina. "As we enter the fourth hour, when we're just past the middle, we start thinking, 'Why are we doing this? When is it going to *end*?' " says Tom Chiu, Flux's founder and first violinist. "You're like a jockey on a horse, and the horse is about to run wild: your concentration goes into places where we have to rein it in. Then, about three-quarters of the way in, there's a section that's sublimely beautiful. By the sixth hour, once we're close enough to the finish line, we can see the goal at the end."

The Feldman work may be an extreme case, but it typifies the Flux's dedication to the unusual. Chiu took the quartet's name from the Fluxus movement, originating in the 1960s, which sought to break down walls between artistic categories. The free-spirited Fluxus ethos can be seen in the quartet's choice of collaborators, who range from Ornette Coleman to heavy-metal guitarist Kirk Hammett to balloon musician Judy Dunaway. The quartet's repertoire reflects Chiu's longstanding dedication to new and modern music, mixing the works of contemporary composers (Leroy Jenkins, John Zorn, Osvaldo Golijov) with those of modern masters (Ligeti, Nancarrow, Xenakis).

"As a student, I saw that in the other arts—film, theater, literature, even [non-classical] genres of music—it's all about producing new things," says Chiu. "But in so-called classical music, it's more the norm to play the music of dead composers. I love older music: without the foundations of my traditional training, I don't think I could bring to new music what I bring. But the whole principle of playing living composers—I felt that was important."

In its performances, the quartet seeks to embody certain precepts of the Fluxus movement—for one, the idea that art could be enjoyed by anybody, not just an aesthetic elite. Chiu says that the precept applies even to the rigorous modern music (the Feldman quartet, for example) that is the ensemble's bread and butter. "I think great experimental music doesn't have to be difficult," he says. "And I think great composers understand that. What would be an unhealthy part of concert-presenting would be a wall between the stage and the audience. The job of the performer is to knock down that wall."

www.fluxquartet.com



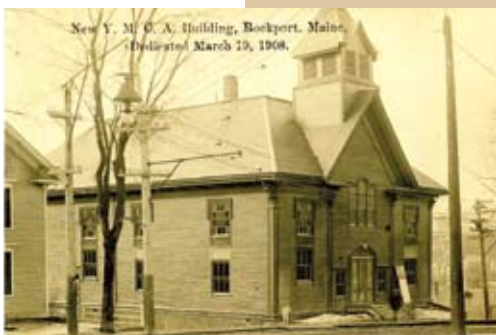
FLUX ON THE
BARGE: VIOLINISTS
TOM CHIU AND
CONRAD HARRIS,
VIOLIST
MAX MANDEL,
AND CELLIST
FELIX FAN

School Days Concert Nights

Even though **Bay Chamber Concerts** is best known as a presenting festival, the pedagogic impulse is part of its very identity. The Rockport, Maine, organization grew out of a Curtis Institute summer program, founded in 1930 by Mary Curtis Bok (later Zimbalist). There, the

presario Boris Goldovsky, were both Rockport denizens. The brothers made it their personal project to revive Rockport's tradition of music-making and set about getting the support of their elders. "I think the whole Curtis community thought this was very cute," Tom Wolf says today. Mary Curtis Bok Zimbalist underwrote the venture with a \$1,000 donation; since Tom's name was on the check, he became the artistic director.

The first concerts came the next summer, featuring the Wolf brothers—Andrew was a pianist and Tom, a flutist—and their near contemporaries, with an occasional older



ABOVE: THE ROCKPORT OPERA HOUSE IN 1908. THE BUILDING WAS CONVERTED TO A YMCA BEFORE BEING ADOPTED AS THE CONCERT VENUE FOR BAY CHAMBER CONCERTS IN THE 1960S.

RIGHT: THE ROCKPORT OPERA HOUSE TODAY.



likes of Josef Hofmann and Felix Salmond would teach, also giving concerts in an old barn; Gregor Piatigorsky frequented the local general store for a favorite kind of salty herring. The Curtis program was discontinued in 1945, but the musical colony lived on—many of the faculty bought their houses from the school and continued to summer in Rockport.

Cut to 1960 and Thomas and Andrew Wolf, teenaged musicians with deep Rockport roots. Their grandmother, violinist Lea Luboshutz, and their uncle, the opera im-

musician "to provide credibility." The performers earned \$25 a concert. Andrew took over as artistic director a couple of years later; he was responsible for moving the concerts into the Rockport Opera House, a renovated vaudeville theater.

In 1985, Andrew Wolf died, tragically young. In the years since, Tom Wolf has been serving once again as artistic director. He is also the founder of WolfBrown, an arts consultancy, and has used his consulting expertise to work with Bay Chamber's board



TOM WOLF WITH ROCKPORT'S
ODEON YOUTH ORCHESTRA

on a strategic planning process. The conclusion: in order for organization to stay viable, it needed to concentrate on providing educational resources to its community.

“We concluded that the second 50 years could not be like the first 50 years—the whole model was not really sustainable,” says Wolf. “It used to be we could bring in top-notch musicians and say, ‘Come for three or four weeks; we’ll give you a nice vacation.’ But now the summer is a time when chamber musicians make a great deal of money.”

The need for a new level of funding meant becoming a full-time operation. “You can’t hire a good development person for two months,” says Wolf. “If you want good people, you need to have them year-round. So we needed another business to offload some of the administration costs.”

That new business was education. Although Bay Chamber’s operations have always included an educational component, it stepped up its efforts under the new mandate. The organization now offers a range of programs, most aimed at musicians, young and old, in the Rockport area—among these are a “Fall Foliage” camp for adult amateur musicians, a youth orchestra, private lessons and dance workshops. And this summer, Bay Chamber will celebrate its 50th season with the inauguration of a new community music school, housed in a brick building in the center of town.

“We could have said ‘We’re terrific; we’re wonderful’ and kept on going,” says Wolf. “In fact, we’re in a completely new stage of reinvention. That’s what makes it exciting.”

www.baychamberconcerts.org

Erratum: In January/February’s “CMA News,” the date of **The Painted Bride Art Center**’s founding was wrongly stated as 1986. The Center was founded in 1969.

In Memoriam

Mariedi (Mary) Anders, founder,
Mariedi Anders Artists Management

Ed Beach, jazz radio host, WRVR

Orlando Cole, cellist; Curtis Institute
of Music; Curtis String Quartet

Bess Lomax Hawes, folklorist, singer
and instrumentalist, Almanac Singers;
co-director, Archive of American Folk
Song; director, Folk Arts Program, NEA

Mildred Hohner, children’s chorus
mistress, Metropolitan Opera; founding
director, New York City Opera
children’s chorus

Lila Deis Lauby, soprano; founding
and artistic director, Rockport Chamber
Music Festival (MA)

Consuela Lee, jazz pianist; educator;
founder, Springtree/Snow Hill Institute
for the Performing Arts

Lily Miki McKinley, pianist

John Storm Roberts, world music
scholar, journalist

Jack Rose, guitarist

Ludmila Ulehla, composer, educator,
Manhattan School of Music