



For more than five decades, **ANTHONY CHECCHIA** and **FRANK SALOMON** have been at the heart of the Marlboro Music School and Festival, providing stability and continuity—and nurturing generations of America's top classical musicians.

BY *Richard Dyer*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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MARLBORO MILESTONES

Tiny Marlboro College nestles in the foothills of the Green Mountains in southern Vermont. An inconspicuous sign on Route 9 leading out of Brattleboro directs you to make a left turn onto South Road, which meanders three miles through rural landscapes dotted with apple trees and barns until it reaches the cluster of white clapboard campus buildings, the summer home of the Marlboro Music School and Festival. Stuck on a hillside is a road sign that became famous and still stands: “Caution: Musicians at Play.”

While the road that heads into Marlboro is narrow and twisting, you could argue that the road that leads out and away grows broader every year. Marlboro may be a quiet place, but the reverberations it has sent out for the last 60 years have spread across America and indeed around much of the world.

Chamber Music America is bestowing its Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award this year on two Marlboro men, Anthony Checchia and Frank Salomon, friends and colleagues for more than fifty years. They are the administrators of the Music School and Festival; their job, like those of the musicians who rehearse and perform there, is to turn idealism into actuality.

Marlboro was founded in the spirit of chamber music, an ongoing conversation among equals. Therefore it is an institution that formally acknowledges no leader because everyone there is a seeker, and all seekers are on the same plane: Marlboro prides itself on both the individuality of every voice in the ensemble and the interdependence of all voices. Nevertheless, Checchia and

Salomon have made themselves national leaders in the advocacy for chamber music through their longevity and experience, innovation and imagination; their idealism is the practical, hard-knuckle kind.

Checchia has been involved with this unpretentious but powerful institution since 1956, only five years after it was founded by such legendary figures as the violinist Adolf Busch, his brother, the cellist Herman Busch, his son-in-law, pianist Rudolf Serkin; flutist Marcel Moyse, and *his* son Louis Moyse and his daughter-in-law, violinist and conductor Blanche Moyse. Salomon arrived four summers after Checchia, in 1960.

Marlboro alumni like to speak of the Marlboro “family.” That’s what it was at the beginning, quite literally, and a family atmosphere remains pervasive today. Both Checchia and Salomon met their wives at Marlboro, and Salomon enjoys pointing out that 60 marriages have resulted from rehearsing and playing together at Marlboro—three of them in the past year. Some of the young musicians at the festival and school spent part of their early years there as children of musical parents who were in residence.

When Checchia arrived at Marlboro as a young bassoonist, most of the founders were still very active in every aspect of the school. And key elements of the Marlboro experience were already in place. There was no formal distinction between “faculty” and “students,” and senior musicians did not coach young musicians in “how the music goes.” Instead musicians of all ages study and rehearse together. They perform together, too, but only when everyone feels comfortable and the work is ready.

MARLBORO

Opposite: Checchia (l.) and Salomon today. This page: Salomon, Checchia, and Rudolf Serkin confer in Marlboro’s dining hall; Salomon in front of Persons Auditorium; Serkin and soprano Benita Valente.





Checchia, Salomon, and Serkin, in the late 1980s; picnic on the grass in front of Persons Auditorium; famed clarinetist Harold Wright demonstrating left-handed frisbee prowess.

Checchia found himself in a very special class that included such future luminaries as the violinist Berl Senofsky and pianists Anton Kuerti, Lee Luvisi, Gary Graffman and Van Cliburn (who had not yet won the Tchaikovsky competition and was therefore not yet a celebrity). Not to mention the youngest kid on the block, a tousle-haired 13-year-old named James Levine, who made his debut as a conductor leading the chorus in a Marlboro production of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. Cliburn and several of the others sang in the chorus.

Very soon Checchia realized he had entered a unique atmosphere. In those days, before Persons Auditorium was built, the weekend concerts took place in the college dining hall. Before the public could be admitted and a concert could take place, the tables needed to be folded and put away, and the chairs rearranged. "I met Mr. Serkin at the other end of a table I was folding," Checchia recalls. "He was a full participant in the school and festival, and he rolled up his sleeves to get the work done, just like everyone else."

Checchia continues, "To enter the spirit here represents success of a special kind. There is a community here in which all of us serve one another—the Kibbutz effect." Salomon adds, "this is what the founders had in mind; learning to play second violin is just as important as mastering a showy solo part."

Salomon's road to Marlboro was more circuitous. A concert-goer since childhood, Salomon entered the Army after graduating from New York University. He was stationed in Texas and once hitchhiked from San Antonio to Dallas to see the now-legendary production of Cherubini's *Medea* with Maria Callas and Jon Vickers.

Back in New York, Salomon landed a job with the New School Concerts founded by Marlboro icon, violinist Alexander Schneider, who offered Salomon \$1.00 an hour for up to 20 hours of work managing and promoting a concert featuring Handel's *Concerti Grossi*, Op. 6. Characteristically, Salomon went into overdrive and worked for 60 hours, and sold out the house. That Greenwich Village series still thrives under Salomon's direction and presents a modestly priced seven-concert series every season.

Last summer Checchia and Salomon sat down in the living room of Hendricks House, a few steps down the hill from the dining hall, to talk about Marlboro and their experiences in chamber music. Their personalities are complementary—Checchia is calm, thoughtful and genial. Salomon, more excitable, enjoys the role of raconteur. Floating in from an adjoining room is the unmistakable

silvery timbre of the beloved soprano Benita Valente, Checchia's wife, who is "around to help with the singers and to work with them on their diction," Checchia says.

(Valente, incidentally, is a previous winner of Chamber Music America's National Service Award for her work in vocal chamber music; her Marlboro recording of Schubert's song *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen* with Rudolf Serkin and clarinetist Harold Wright stands as one of the great classics of the LP era.)

Checchia's movement into administrative activity was "a gradual thing," he says, and for many years he combined playing with administrative responsibilities. A recording of Vivaldi bassoon concertos demonstrates what a sparkling and eloquent virtuoso he was. He did not let himself evolve into a drab bureaucrat—his flamboyant wardrobe is part of the Marlboro legend. In the fall of 1958 he accepted the title and took on the duties of "business manager," whose job, among other things, involved making arrangements with senior artists to participate in the following summer season. He still does that, and his comprehensive knowledge of the repertoire helps in establishing the various groups and subgroups each summer's musicians divide into.

Salomon knows how to work a room and charm the press, and his entrepreneurial side led to the establishment of popular Musicians from Marlboro tours in 1965. The musicians play in annual series in five East Coast cities, usually adding a few extra concerts in other cities across the country as well. Far from competing with local chamber music societies, Music from Marlboro played an important role in generating them; each of the cities in which Musicians from Marlboro appears now boasts its own chamber music society.

"The idea," Salomon says, "was to give the young musicians the

Indoor and outdoor glimpses of life at Marlboro; Second photo from left: Salomon with Sampson R. Field, the chairman of Marlboro's board of directors



opportunity to put into practice what they had gained from their summers in Marlboro, with something we can't do here. It is in the Marlboro summer contracts that nobody can be guaranteed that he or she will perform. That depends on the repertory, how the rehearsals are going, on what pieces fit on a program with what other pieces. What the tour offers is the opportunity to play the same program multiple times, and that usually is a revelation to the musicians. [The flutist] Paula Robison likes to talk about how other things were revelations too—what to pack, what vitamins to take to compensate for road food, how to handle yourself at a reception. Not to mention the self-discipline of repeatedly showing up on time and learning how to pace yourself.”

In addition to Robison, Musicians from Marlboro has given early opportunity and exposure to hundreds of artists, including pianists Yefim Bronfman, Murray Perahia, Andrés Schiff, and Peter Serkin; violinists Jaime Laredo, Pamela Frank and Christian Tetzlaff; and musicians now active in more than a dozen prominent string quartets and three piano trios.

Checchia and Salomon are in the paradoxical position of being administrators in an institution that is in a state of constant evolution—but one that nobody wants to become too organized, or formalized, or institutionalized. Checchia gets a laugh when he describes Marlboro activity as “organized confusion,” but it is clear that he means it and wants to keep it that way.

In part, the administration wants to adhere to tradition. Rudolf Serkin liked to keep the musicians in constant rotation as part of the learning process, for example. If anyone got to feel too comfortable, it was time to move on to another group. “It is important for musicians to be exposed to different viewpoints throughout the process of forming their individual identities,” Salomon says

But keeping the place going is also a question of attunement to the qualities of outstanding individual participants and to the differing needs and expectations of new generations of performers.

Checchia points to the long residency of the late composer Leon Kirchner at Marlboro as an example. “We have always had new music here; but when Leon was here, many young composers and performers interested in new music really wanted to come here and work with him.”

When Kirchner left, it wasn't a question of “replacing” him or of finding someone else to duplicate what he did; instead it was a

question of seeing what would happen next, and welcoming it, a question of enabling the next thing to happen. Similarly vocal music has sometimes been important at Marlboro, sometimes not. Checchia, married to a great singer, enjoys having singers around. “This gives a lot of the instrumentalists a chance to hear and play a marvelous repertory they haven't been exposed to.”

Like playing in a trio, quartet, or quintet, administering Marlboro requires a constant, vigilant flexibility. Nevertheless flexibility must stand on a firm foundation, and Checchia and Salomon were both significantly involved in two processes that have helped assure Marlboro's future.

One, of course, has to do with finances; and both men are quick to pay tribute to Frank E. Taplin, Jr., who died in 2003. Taplin was by birth wealthy and by education a lawyer; he was also an enthusiastic and accomplished pianist in both classical music and in jazz. In character, he was a generous philanthropist.

For most of its first decade, Marlboro led a hand-to-mouth existence. Rudolf Serkin approached Taplin about helping Marlboro stabilize its situation. Checchia and Salomon worked with Taplin on long-range planning, setting up a board, and raising an endowment. “Frank was a great man, full of enthusiasm and common sense,” Salomon recalls. “He became our mentor, and he even corrected our split infinitives and dangling participles.”

Checchia adds, “If it weren't for Frank, we wouldn't be here today. Today half of our income comes from the endowment he helped us to create.”

Taplin's annual picnics for the Marlboro musicians became a part of the legend; the Taplin family still organizes the picnics today.

The other major turning point came with the declining health of Rudolf Serkin and his death in May, 1991. Serkin and Marlboro were synonymous; if Marlboro was a community of equals, Serkin was first among them; he was the most prominent and visible symbol of Marlboro's mission.

In a sense, Serkin was the teacher of everyone in the community and everyone wanted to preserve the structure he had helped to create, the policies he had helped to establish, the standards and spirit that he embodied in his work and in his life. So everyone felt that the future should evolve out of the community rather than result from the work of a search committee or a decision from on high—there is “no high” at Marlboro.

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Checchia and Salomon and the senior artists kept Marlboro humming along, and it wasn't until 2000, nine years after Serkin's death, that Richard Goode and Mitsuko Uchida were officially named as Marlboro's artistic directors. Goode had first come to Marlboro as a 14 year-old; Uchida was there in the early 1970s. As an adult, Goode remained intermittently involved; Uchida returned in 1992. Each of them took plenty of time to participate in rehearsals, to assess the situation, and to work out a plan for sharing responsibility. Now each is at Marlboro for the entire summer in alternate summers; the other comes for four weeks. The next year, they reverse their roles.

Both have proved "an inspiration" to the younger musicians, Salomon points out. "It is fascinating to watch Richard in rehearsal. He'll say, 'I think I have it,' and a minute later he'll say, 'Let's try something else,' and the next day he'll come in and say, 'Forget it. That idea was all wrong.' Mitsuko is basically a very private person, but you will see her every night sitting at a table surrounded by 20-something musicians. She loves to be in the company of young people."

Marlboro musicians are famous for creating their own ensembles and festivals after leaving Vermont. Salomon claims that 42 chamber music series in the state of New York alone were started by Marlboro people.

And both Salomon and Checchia have been missionaries for music in other cities. In 1986, Checchia formed the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, which now presents over 60 concerts a season. It is the nation's largest presenter of chamber music, and it does the job while charging budget prices. In 1964 Salomon started arranging some concerts for the 17-year-old Peter Serkin, and Frank Salomon Associates has been managing individual artists and ensembles ever since. In 1969 he created the New York String Orchestra Seminar for Alexander Schneider; Jaime Laredo continues to direct it today. In 1972 he took over New York's People's Symphony Concerts, which includes a substantial chamber music component.

Checchia and Salomon can look back on their careers with satisfaction, although both are too busy in the present, and too preoccupied with planning future seasons, to devote much time to nostalgia. Full of energy, they seem both calm and happy. Stepping out into the cool evening air, Salomon surveys the students heading towards the dining hall and says, "This place is Brigadoon."

Richard Dyer wrote about music in The Boston Globe for 33 years. Since retiring from the newspaper, he has written weekly podcasts for the Boston Symphony, taught at the Tanglewood Music Center and elsewhere, lectured and written program notes for many organizations, and served on the jury of the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition.

Jazzin' Around, *continued from page 31*

You Needn't," a muscular baritone sax solos against Latin rhythms, then trades fours with Forrester's piano, which somehow fuses two divergent styles without incongruity and with subtle, undeniable swing.

Seven Men in Neckties and *Surrealistic Swing* (Cuneiform), a two-volume retrospective, celebrate the Micros' fecund composing and arranging skills, and showcase their antic daredevilry. Echoes of Dixieland, Kansas City swing, postwar blues-and-gospel blow-outs reverberate across these charts, largely by Johnston and Forrester, who explains, "My charts for the Micros are all piano-based and through-composed. Mingus's sectional tunes from his mid-60s groups influence the arrangements, as does the collective improvisation in King Oliver's Chicago units and early Ornette. The harmony is usually Monkian. No one solos for very long, and often there's an ensemble background."

Forrester has written an astonishing 1,200 tunes that travel blithely across the musical universe. His creative process: "Often I operate, as a composer, under the misapprehension that what I am writing exists, whole and complete, *somewhere else!* Like the *future*. Melody is always what I'm after; everything else is supplementary. I carry around notepaper and scratch down a riff—often disjunct tones hung over a rhythm suggested by something going on in front of me (or within me). When I get to the piano, I work out the implications of the riff: its suggested harmony, whether it begs extension, what instrument it seems to nominate. Is there a future in it? That's always the question. Sometimes it isn't answered for *years*."

Check out what Forrester means on solo flights like *Stop The Music* (Koch), or with his agile, like-minded quartet People Like Us, the remarkable Hofstra, trenchant baritone saxist Claire Daly, and the late great drummer Dennis Charles, on *Heaven*, on *No... Really!* and *Believe It* (Koch).

Forrester has steady solo gigs around New York, but also periodically works with tapdancer Peggy Spina. Their plan of attack: "She records solo-piano versions of a bunch of my new tunes, then picks a few and makes dances to them. Half a year on, she hires my quartet (with Vito Dieterle on tenor) to play the chosen ones. Her choreography follows the tunes' original lineaments, while the quartet improvises over them. What the musicians do is modified (sometimes ecstatically) by what the dancers are doing, right in front of us."

Forrester is a hidden treasure. You can change that, at least for yourself. The rewards will deepen each time you listen.

*Gene Santoro is the author of several books on American music, including *Myself When I am Real*, a biography of Charles Mingus (Oxford, 2001), and *Highway 61 Revisited*, which examines the complex roots of American music (Oxford, 2004).*