

Generations play together and stay together at Marlboro Music Festival By Jim Lowe



Angela Park carries her cello and music stand to a rehearsal at Marlboro Music Festival.

Photo by Stefan Hard

After 60 years, Marlboro Music Festival is still more about continuity than change.

“I feel the continuity more than the differences,” said pianist Richard Goode, co-artistic director with Mitsuko Uchida. “The principle remains the same

– and wonderful, talented people keep coming.”

Marlboro, which is often called one of the best chamber music festivals in the world, is really more of a summer school for young up-and-coming professional musicians. Its unique formula has the young players not only rehearsing and performing with veteran musicians, often famous ones, but also living with them for seven weeks on the rural Marlboro College campus.

Marlboro is all about rehearsal, but public performances are given each weekend at Marlboro College's Persons Auditorium, plus informal concerts on Wednesdays in the dining hall. Performances this season will continue through Aug. 15.

Goode first came to Marlboro in 1957 at the age of 14 and attended for many years before becoming co-artistic director in 1999. Uchida, another world-famous pianist, also came as a young player.

And that tradition continues, according to Frank Salomon, co-administrator with Anthony Cecchia since 1960.

“What Tony and I have seen in Marlboro's evolution is the fact that now two-thirds of the senior musicians in the community are people who originally came as young artists here,” Salomon said.

They include many of today's prominent musicians, such as Vermont-bred pianist and conductor Ignat Solzhenitsyn and violinist Soovin Kim, once concertmaster of the Vermont Youth Orchestra and now artistic director of Colchester's Lake Champlain Chamber Music Festival.

“There's such a long continuity at Marlboro, really unchanged from when I remember it even as a 9- or 10-year-old, coming here to observe (pianist Rudolf) Serkin's rehearsals and so forth,” Solzhenitsyn said between rehearsals. “Of course it feels different now because I've changed, as I come in a different role, as a senior member. That's an important distinction, but they don't make that distinction here formally.”

Kim, who first came as a Curtis Institute of Music student in 1996 and returned later as a senior member, is part of an even longer succession – which he finds a bit disconcerting.

“This year, I have two students here for the first time,” he said, also on a break between rehearsals. “One of them studied with me when she was 18 and she's a grown-up now.”

“But it's also wonderful and it's going to continue from this point on,” said Kim, still in his early 30s. “But I'm still enjoying being part of the younger crowd here.”

European roots

Marlboro was created when revered European musicians came together in southern Vermont after World War II.

In 1949, the French Moyse Trio – flutist Marcel Moyse; son Louis Moyse, a flutist and pianist; and Louis' wife, Blanche, a violinist – were invited by German violinist Adolf Busch and his son-in-law Rudolf Serkin, who had summer homes in nearby Guilford, to create the music department at fledgling Marlboro College. The next summer, joined by Busch's cellist brother Hermann, they performed and taught chamber music to young professionals – and Marlboro Music Festival was born.

Adolf Busch died in 1953, and Serkin became director. The festival was soon joined by other star faculty, including pianist Claude Frank and violinists Felix Galimir and Alexander Schneider. But it also attracted young musicians who soon were to be stars, including pianists Anton Kuerti, Van Cliburn and James Levine, violinists Jaime Laredo and Arnold Steinhardt (of the Guarneri Quartet) and soprano Benita Valente.

“I had never been with so many wonderful players,” said Goode, who was also among those young players. “I heard close by and worked with players of such a high level. It was a wonderful experience.”

“It was kind of ‘throw him in the deep end and see how he swims,’” Goode added with a laugh.

Down to earth

At Marlboro, it's all about the music, as was brought home for Goode in a particularly memorable experience working on a Bach concerto for three pianos. Rudolf Serkin and son Peter played the other two pianos while Schneider conducted.

“That was the only piece I ever rehearsed with Serkin and realized how amazingly exacting he was,”

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Goode said. "It was extraordinary. At the end, Serkin said, 'Let's play the last movement again,' and then Sasha (Schneider) said, 'Well, why don't we do also the second movement? It's so beautiful,' so Serkin said, 'Why don't we do the whole piece again?' Which we did."

Uchida, too, remembers the early years – and the principle that remains in force at Marlboro to this day.

"The interesting idea of putting young people and older ones together is an extraordinarily wonderful idea by Serkin," she said. "The difference between having this senior in a group (you are playing with) and a teacher who is teaching you something is that the teacher never makes a mistake."

In Marlboro's rehearsal process, the senior musicians play together with the younger ones.

"That makes it much more open and changes the advantage," Uchida said. "That's what it is. These days, I want them to figure out the music, so I encourage everyone to do so."

Kim, who has participated in festivals throughout the country, said it is this principle – leadership by example, rather than dictate – that sets Marlboro apart.

"We got to see (senior musicians) even one step closer, playing with them, not being coached by them or taught by them," Kim said, "but also living with them, seeing them as regular human beings, not as these god-like figures on stage, which they really are, and to see how they live.

"They live as our peers – that, I think, is the biggest inspiration."

Still, the atmosphere has become more democratic since the early days.

"We had these great authority figures and they were large – with Serkin and Moyse," Goode said. "I think there's now more of a spread of people – and I think that's good – because there's a closer communication between young and old. People like (violinist) Joe Lin and Soovin Kim – these people are really experienced chamber music players, but they're in their early 30s. That makes perhaps for an easier communication atmosphere."

For themselves

The other unique aspect of Marlboro is rehearsal time. There is no limit to rehearsal time, and many works are never performed.

"Less than 25 percent of the pieces worked on here are publicly performed," Salomon said.

"I didn't really grasp what Marlboro was about when I was young," Uchida said, "but when I came back, I began to understand what it is to have so much time ... and to honestly and sincerely and exactly and deeply as possible to work out what it is that the piece of music is saying.

"That is the whole challenge of life, but we do have more time here."

"But even here, the time is too short ..."