

Notes on the KCMF **From the journal of Tina Letcher**

July 27, 2003

Last night after the Mendelssohn Octet the entire Festival cast, very hopped up, came to our house, ate hugely, talked for 3 hours and finally left at almost 2 a.m. We never did get new screens and I was painfully aware of people slapping at mosquitos on the porch, but otherwise it was fascinating to hear these people talking nonstop about musicians and music. Not to mention Margot's wedding, coming up soon, with Peter's and Caterina's children as flower kids. Young Jason drank and talked a lot. He's the buffoon, David says. You need one like him to liven things up. Young Che-Hung said almost nothing. They're the new kids on the block, but they seem to have had the same teachers and know the same people as David. There's a whole world of music gossip, hilarious imitation of teachers, earnest attempts to understand them—that we never get to hear. All this we ate up.

Meanwhile, Jane's eyes were closing. She's heard it all before. Now David is doing a lot more solo playing than he did when he was trying so hard to be a soloist. "I thought he would be home more," Jane said plaintively, yawning. Not so much fun to stay home with the kids, even with a nanny. Steve and I think this life is so exotic. Yeah, until you have to live it.

Sarah Chang is here, with her father. She flew in from Switzerland last night and came to our house for a while. Brian: "The prima donna, what's her name." Steve just came home from yet another party and of course he's in love with her. Now he's off to pick up Paavali Jumppanen, the pianist, who is going to have to practice with Sarah Chang (her call) the minute he arrives from Finland, about 10:30 p.m. She doesn't think one rehearsal tomorrow before the performance is enough. Well, usually there are 4. David's playing Prokofiev with her, Sonata for 2 Violins, Op. 56. Apparently he has been getting together with her to practice already.

What a life. This new grown-up David is charming but I miss the days when he'd got his bow stuck and had to stop in mid-concert. "Shit!" says David loudly. The audience loves it.

Well, David broke a string in the Prokofiev and all he did was smile and grimace and say, "And it was going so well. . ." So grown up. It went well all over again. Everything has gone well, especially that concert with Sarah Chang and the willowy Onder Twin pianists. Everything's sold out. Imagine. Channing Gray gave a rave review for the performers in the Projo, although he did mention that the festival itself had been a "rather sleepy, grass-roots effort" before that. Oh, well, he always has to include a barb—and he likes David. The Newport Chamber Music Festival threw Channing out for years because of his acerbity—and partly because he was right, I bet.

Last night the Onder sisters played their Jamestown program in Kingston, beautifully. Storms of applause. But in fact Paavali and the youngsters received a standing ovation for what I wasn't sure was a very convincing rendition by 5 strings and 1 piano of Beethoven's #4 piano concerto. Roars of approval also for the repeat performance of Enesco's Romanian Rhapsody in A. The musicians were high on all that adulation by the time they found our house. There must have been 50 people crammed in here with a few mosquitos and 10 large scary moths and very high humidity. Who cared—beside me.

David stayed to the very last, helping to clean up, dissecting the people and the performers a little, proud of the 15th festival and really tired. Again, it was after 1 a.m. by the time people left. In Korean, "we say, 'Second Festival,'" David told us, looking pleased and exhausted after his rehash. Nice to have a little window open in our staid lives for the enthusiasm of the young, even though David now feels like the old man of the festival!

This 2008 journal entry begins with a letter to son Ben.

July 23, 2008

Dear Bunch,

We would love to have you come this weekend. What do you think tho--you might have to do a lot of shmoozing with yr elders. Or bike to the beach or go see Ratch to escape! We're deep into Festivaltime. 2d concert tomorrow, 3rd Sat. Fri is out to supper with the Kims --who would love to have you along as some relief from us elders, I'm sure-- Sat the Kid concert at 11 and 3rd concert at 8, Sunday a piano concert at 4. It would be fun to take you to a concert so you could feel the electric excitement, approximately 1/100 that of The Who, but still. . .it's really something. All concerts have already sold out. Even Crin and Harold are coming for the weekend but luckily they're staying at a B&B. You can see -David is going all out for his last festival, the 20th Anniversary Yr, don't ya know.

Plus, at last I don't have to keep the secret that was burning a hole in the back of my mind any longer: he's handing the administration over to Natalie Zhu, a pianist at the festival for the last 5 yrs. He told us in May when we went to supper with him before a Philadelphia Orch. Concert. We were the 1st people he told and yr mom did not breathe a word to anybody, imagine. He asked Steve's advice in a really sweet way which gave yr dad a great jolt of surprise, terror -and pleasure. I know Steve was really touched to be consulted first. David was in anguish really, thought maybe he could reduce the festival to one wk from 2, etc. etc. Or stop it altogether, in case it goes downhill after he leaves? S came home and wrote David a whole page of possibilities, and I think that helped. Everybody who hears about it is traumatized at first. The Festival without David? Impossible. But we're getting used to it.

The Narr Times scooped the Projo ! Thursday they had a big article about the festival and called him, so because they cared enough to check the article with him, he told them. The next morning at 7 a.m. Steve and I were out at the balloon festival watching 5 balloons attempt to land exactly on the festival green (1 made it.) Another couple saw our festival t shirts and nearly began to cry. So it goes.

Last night a very touching farewell from David (his main excuse is he wants to spend more time with the kids, age 6 & 7, thanked Jane his wife profusely but did not actually mention spending time with her). Then Natalie got up and tho she has a very different personality, very quiet and not spontaneous on her feet like David, she was great too. She is as organized as he is and we think she is a very good choice--may not be so careful with every detail as he, which would actually give for the board more responsibility For instance, at the end of her speech the 2 Kim kids came up with flowers for her, a perfect idea which came from a board member. You can see it is a big deal for us as I go on & on. And would be even better with you around. love, Ma

I spent the whole morning today at a Festival rehearsal of *Souvenir de Florence*, the Tchaikovsky sextet. What a study in the way music is made! It was like going on a virtual vacation, one of those vacations not far from home that everybody's taking this year because of the high cost of any kind of travel. But I truly felt as though I had entered another world.

Was I late? As I zipped past Brian by the door he mentioned casually that they hadn't

started yet, some schedule misunderstanding. Actually, too much partying the night before & some sleeping in! "David's doing stand-up in there," he said, grinning. So he was. For about 15 minutes David fielded questions like What's going on with your solo career? It seems concertmasters don't play with orchestras equal to theirs, as a rule, but David does play 10-12 concertos a year with lesser ones-like the Providence Philharmonic, he mentioned casually. I guess it wouldn't be fair to soloists, or orchestras. He has his hands full being concertmaster, especially this year after Eschenbach has left there are now many visiting conductors, and he takes the responsibility of welcoming them, helping them relax in the presence of the august Philadelphia Orchestra-which has just received a \$100 million check from the Annenberg Foundation. Later an orchestra member mentioned that some of the visiting conductors were hard to follow. "So I just watch David."

Actually Effie and Burchard couldn't come that week because their Philadelphia Orchestra management wouldn't give them time off. So Steve and I got one of the last-minute ringers to sponsor, a young violist named Rose Armbrust, age 24, a student at Curtis. When he asked people at Curtis about her, David said he didn't just ask how she played, but what kind of a person she was. How she would match the others, fit in. It's very important to him that participants have a good time at this event, feel a sense of community. We've watched that happen, year after year-even when things didn't work out perfectly . . .

During the rehearsal it was evident that "Rosie" and Stephanie, the second violin, were a lot younger and less experienced. I felt for our sponsee a little of the protective nervousness my mom said she used to feel watching me in Eastman School Prep Dept. recitals. David explained that some of the 6 artists had performed this piece many times, and for some it was the first. It was obvious who was who from their body language! As the rehearsal progressed he'd say, "Rosie, I wonder if at bar 193 you could . . ." Rosie: "I could n't feel the beat." David: "Yu mp, buh, yump buh...bow it like this." Rosie does exactly what he says. Later, they're all too loud. David: "We should absolutely not worry about projection here." But even later: "Rose, at the beginning of your big solo, can we kinda push you along a little bit?" Rosie: "Yeah, yeah" and repeats her solo just fine. He's right with her all the time: "Rosie, could you and Priscilla take over, right at 72?" And as if to make amends for pushing her hard: "I like what we're doing at 68, holding back on vibrato . . ." When Stephanie has her solo, he looks at Rose: "Rose, would you consider trying to be a little stodgier?" They try it. Stephanie: "Maybe in between?" There's real give and take here. But we are always aware who is in charge.

I love David's language. "Hey Ken [Olsen, principle cello, Chicago] -could you be a little gooier here? . . .I feel I need to play off you." Again at 185 "try to be a little slow. We're being so 'accurate'." Again they stop cold. David: "Yes. Excuse me, I totally missed that."

They begin the Adagio, David on solo violin. Stops. "A little faster. Maybe we could not sound this thin in the second bar? Too early to let it die. . ." Che-Hung misses a sharp, grimaces. Smiles all round. David: "Not too violent here, ok? . . ."then, "*that* one more scrubby. Rose is getting more confident. She starts the 3rd movement. David stops just when they're getting going. "You need to be much more grittier." The cellos take it, grinning at each other. They're really gritty. Then again David: Rosie, I'm sorry, I'm pickin' on you. Can you be more bity or just LOUD? Che-Hung demonstrates for her. She's got it.

David: "Duh digga da" You're matching me through all that [plays] then challenging me through all this [plays again]. He takes off at a fast clip. Huh? They stop. Ken Olsen looks at Priscilla and cracks up. In fact the two cellos are having a ball, communicating through grins

and gestures all along. It must be a lot of fun to play with new people. The atmosphere of deep concentration breaks-and then they're right back again. Ken watches David like a hawk, far more than any of the others. He's really into it. His lips compress and release, his face expressive. His foot bounces up and down. At the end, both jeans-clad legs rise into the air in enthusiasm.

As time goes on a real feeling of ensemble grows and grows, it seems to me. When they all stop at once, for some reason not apparent to me, David says, "Priscilla, I'll follow you." It seems the triplets should go "da dum, (pause) UH." And so they do. Soon there's a huge crescendo: "play as PIGGISH as possible." Finally they near the end, which sounds ragged. "I'd rather not cue that," David says. They try it three times. "OK, I'll nod."

It's been a long rehearsal. Even I am tired just trying to hear and understand what they're saying. If only both my ears worked! Ann and her friend sit on either side of me and translate. The sextet just reads through the last movement. In the performance, we're surprised to realize that this movement is really racing compared to the rehearsal. Afterwards I ask David why. "That was me," he says. "I just felt like it."

Everything worked in that concert. The second half featured Anderson & Roe, duo pianists whose YouTube video of "A New Account of the Blue Danube Waltzes" had sent Steve and me into actual gales of laughter and admiration when we watched it beforehand. They were even more fun in real time. Everybody loved them -except David Flanders, the temperamental piano tuner who ostentatiously rose in the middle and stomped out: they had committed the sin of plucking the piano strings. When they finished we stood and roared our appreciation. So fresh and enthusiastic and gifted they are. It was fun to find at Eve and Marty's party later that they're Midwesterners from Chicago and Minnesota. There's a kind of easy electricity between them. They talked about how lonely two-piano recitals are, how good it is for interpretation of the score, crossing hands and sensing the other person's body reactions to the music on one piano bench.

The Seven Last Words of Christ: David had wanted to present these Haydn quartets forever, it seems, and now in what was to become his last year with the Festival, he gathered friends who felt the words as deeply as he did three successive mornings in three different churches. The only requirement was that they be air-conditioned . . . Steve had worked very hard to find those churches, in fact. One more thing he does that's not in his job description.

Originally the "Seven Words" were orchestral interludes intended for a service in Cadiz on Good Friday afternoon. Walls and windows were covered with black cloth, and after each of the Words, the bishop prostrated himself in front of the altar for the duration of each musical interlude. All of them had to be *adagio*-how to vary them? Haydn found it hard to stay with the program, but he did it-then added a dramatic "Earthquake" section as a finale.

Here's what David wrote in the newsletter:

The time is also right [to play Haydn 's 'Seven Last Words of Christ'] given where I am being led in my spiritual walk. I feel that the most beautiful, most honest interpretation I could offer will be informed by a genuine love of and faith in the texts that inspired it. My friends who will be collaborating with me also value these Scriptures as much as the music itself and we hope that our unity in spirit will enhance our unity as a musical ensemble. . .Although I can assure yo u that my friends and I who will collaborate on the Seven Last Words will share our Christian faith with one another during our preparation

and the performances, my motivation is simply to move the hearts of all those who listen through this transcendent and timeless masterpiece.

-David Kim in KCMF Festival Notes, Winter 2007-8

Some people reacted with uneasiness to this message. David Gitlitz even wrote him a protest letter. When I started down the aisle at Christ the King Church, there he was, that same David Gitlitz, waving and smiling. I sat down beside him and he told me the whole story of his own resurrection from a fatal liver disease, and it seemed altogether right that he be there. During the slow progress of that transcendental music my two dearly loved nephews who had died too early stirred in my heart and came to life, yet I felt more and more at peace. It was an uncanny experience.

Steve and I went again the next day to hear it in Dunn's Corner Church. Later David said that it had "all come together" that morning. You could feel it, a certain full, rich, heavy sound, as if the four of them were digging deep into some unknown harmony, almost discovering it as they went along. At one point I even checked my heartbeat to see whether it was moving in sync with the throbbing repeated notes. David said they had "felt free to try new things." I had no idea what those were, but you could feel the electricity of spirit in the air.

The Seven Last Words

The seven last words of Christ gather together here today to play from the hidden places they have lived so long in sorrow.

Instead of speaking they have decided to come slowly, one by one through the woods and into the church. They sit in chairs, bend over their instruments, lift their bows.

We find ourselves lost in the sweet strong sounds they make stretch out our arms and our lungs still sitting, still sitting still until the words in their new voices sink deep into our bodies, flush out our last sad stories, flow disembodied and rejoicing back to the source of all life.

July 29, 2010

The Kingston Chamber Music Festival is nearly over; already 4 concerts sold out, 2 to go. A sigh of relief from Steve. Kudos for Natalie and her programming, which now includes something more than the crowd-pleasers David Kim wisely scheduled when he began. With varied reactions. Marilyn and her ilk do not want anything written after 1900; even Ravel and Shostakovich bother her. But many of us watch Jasmine's violin and Doug's sax literally dance Echiene's Cantilene et Danse with deep pleasure and remark that Beethoven's "Ghost" Trio and a piano sextet Op. 110 that Mendelssohn wrote when he was 15 on the same program must have pleased her. Personally I feel Natalie is a breath of fresh air for the festival. David had had enough after 20 years of trying to please us all. Next year or so he can come back as a participant and everybody will be thrilled. We do miss him and his family a lot. Steve especially felt that David had become almost another son.

This year Steve and I trucked Trio Cavatina around to SPNM (a lot of strings of kids with teen counselors leaving and returning for bathroom breaks causing Steve to vow at the midpoint never to return) and a more attentive if sleepier audience of 50 at Laurelmead Retirement Paradise after supper. They are 3 very savvy women who are trying to do it all: each married: Priscilla with one kid already and now (shh) pregnant again and Harumi thinking about it, Ieva not so interested. And after 5 years they know each other and play together so well.

The Chamber Music Festival has now half finished. No more Jasmine, the violinist with the most enthusiastic athletic bob-and-weave we've ever witnessed, leaping into the air as she solos in a Strauss duo with Natalie. No more gorgeous Naughton twins at either end of the huge expanse of their duo pianos. One Naughton nearly messed up the whole festival by getting sick for a Dohnanyi sextet, finally agreeing to appear 5 minutes before the show. No more David Jolly's virtuoso horn, no more Weber Clarinet quintet.

Words can't describe what we feel, all of us in the sold-out concerts. We're drunk with all this music and half of the intoxication seems to be that it can't stay but floats off into the air and is gone forever.

August 1, 2011

Now the Festival is over, the parties cleaned up, the participants gone, the last Board Meeting triumphantly concluded. I'm interested that Mike and Allie, the young Administrative Assistants, aka gofers and stage hands, have many ideas for involving young people. Steve says they should be on the board. They told me that Mimi, the flutist, played with them for fun. How nice was that.

Maybe we should have master classes, they say. Or raffle off a soloist to play with for fun. Get younger people involved. Even I was flattered when Mike, who played at our church with a recorder quintet, asked how our small gig the next week had gone—so, anything that isn't just playing for the old folk's home or even for kids at camps, but interacting on a more personal level, would help draw people in.

Do we need to? Of course Steve was worried when our sold-out crowds resulted in waiting lists, especially when musicians wanted extra comp tickets at the last minute. But next year the 100 extra seats will be back; URI is starting today to work on a sprinkler system for the auditorium that will allow the increase in seating again. So maybe we do need more subscribers and sponsors. Some festival corporate sponsors are pulling out, but who knows what groups will step forward next year? I still think the greatest need is to draw young people, and so do Allie and Mike.

July 23, 2012

There is something special about the Kingston Chamber Music Festival this year. We're not sure quite what it is. John Hall, one of its best enthusiasts, smiles and says, "It's like everybody has a glow

around them.” He doesn’t mean just the musicians either. Natalie has truly thought outside the usual Chamber Music for Aging Concertgoers box; it’s so exciting to hear “American Treasures” Corigliano, Bloch, Danielpour.” Bridging the Channel: Gaubert “Watercolors” Bax, and best of all, an Unusual **Elgar Piano Quintet in A Minor, Op. 84.**

By the third concert we’re ready for a Kodaly **Serenade for Two Violins and Viola, Op. 12** where both Jasmine Lin (expected) and Noah Geller (unexpected) rise into the air from time to time with enthusiasm as they stand playing together. So together! Everybody in the audience leaps to their feet at the end.

Playing, a strange word for this serious process, I think. Kids play, don’t they? But now I know, it’s more like a game than I’d realized, performing. The word *play* derives from MD *pleien* to leap for joy, dance, rejoice. Leap for joy, that’s it. That’s what we all did. Magic--almost as though we in the audience had been up there ourselves.

There’s another surprise for us in the first half of this concert: **Bartok’s Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion.** It’s a mammoth undertaking. Two grand pianos— keyboards to the front, edges nearly touching—and an array of drums, xylophone, etc. crowd the stage.

Natalie and Hanchin Lee sit with their backs to each other, two small women making such a huge sound--how do they do it? They can’t even see each other, & they’re spot on, as far as I can tell. I’ve never seen two pianos not nestled together on stage so that the artists face each other. Is that symbolic?

It’s hard to imagine that this piece was performed first in Hungary in January of 1938, the year I was born. The pianos seem to me a huge dark butterfly hovering over the stage. Is it the image of a vicious war about to break out? A war that will soon force Bartok to leave his country? Or of something wonderful, the power of music to bridge gaps between people and countries, old and new?

It still sounds fresh and new to us, this music. In fact it nearly overwhelms our rather conservative audience nearly three quarters of a century after it was written. With its complicated rhythms, “different ideas played off against one another” [program notes] and the immense range of both pianos fully in play, *in play*, this piece flies. Afterwards, there’s another of our standing ovations.

My honey Steve the KCMF Board Treasurer been worried for a month or so about ticket sales, which are down by about 50 per concert this year—and ironically this is the year that the Festival was finally allowed to add another 80 chairs in the front again. (Thanks to the new sprinkler systems, the Fire Department gave in.) Steve wonders: will they lose money again this year? Is it a good ploy to introduce music “unusual” for a fairly staid audience in hopes of attracting younger people? Do we need to do this to survive? Will it work? Even after I report multiple rave reviews, he worries.

At one of the concerts Steve spoke with a group of people who go to the Providence Chamber Music Society concerts. We’ve been to these concerts. They are pretty traditional but they’ve got big money so the groups are very good. These people raved about the concert that night in little Kingston. “We would never be able to offer a program like this,” they said. “Our audience wouldn’t stand for it.” They wondered how we did it. They wish they felt they could.

Karen told me after the Elgar Piano Quintet that she was going to buy a CD of it. “I think that was the most wonderful concert I’ve ever been to,” she said. Ann Zartler left Steve a message after the Bartok: “Last night was so spectacular I’ll never forget it.” There have been many similar responses, Natalie tells me. But Steve still worries about the people who left at intermission last night.

Only 2 concerts left. Sometimes one feels exhausted by this time, just from too much of a great thing—I do a bit. Yesterday I parked at the Fine Arts Bldg. in order to mount a clandestine raid on tansy and Queen Ann’s lace nearby—and Natalie was just pulling out. I quickly moved my scissors behind me and we talked for a few minutes. Beaming, she reported on many rave notices about the concerts. Me too.

The other night we had supper at Sadd's with Gail Niwa and her precocious Matthew, now 3 and reading. It was fun to play with him and especially to talk to Christina, his nanny who comes, we vaguely remember, from Slovenia and is a real world citizen. Gail is the perfect older mom, besotted with her little guy. "He's coming to a concert," she said proudly. On Wednesday Steve sat next to him, and sure enough, he was (mostly) attentive and quiet. Of course he already has his own tiny violin.

July 28, 2012

Last night the RUSSIAN TITANS concert repeated the dark 8th Shostakovich String Quartet literally in the dark. Steve remembers clearly that dark stage from years ago. I'm glad I don't, because for me this time the black clothes and background somehow caused faces and limbs of the artists to merge into one organism. As the quartet seethed and pulsed before my eyes like a body not quite in control of itself, repeating references to its creator's name over and over like a mantra, a plea for recognition, simultaneously it became less human, almost animal. *What is a human being*, Shostakovich seemed to be asking, *in a system that doesn't allow it to be noticed?* He dedicated the quartet "to the victims of war and fascism," including himself as the initials "D. Sch" (D, E-flat, C, B).

Shostakovich wants to make something truthful and beautiful, and he has to bow to the system. How to do it? His music in this quartet somehow manages to make a compromise that has lasted on its own. Partly because it's not afraid to sing in the dark.

This morning I invited Lily and Bianca to watch the rehearsal of the Brahms Piano Quintet Op. 34. They showed up for the last 5 minutes. OK, so they got to meet Natalie backstage. And I got to sit up in front and watch Natalie, Kyu-Young Kim, Elissa Koljonen (Roberto Diaz' wife) and married couple Burchard Tang and Priscilla Lee work hard for a couple of hours.

At one point when they were struggling to coordinate a difficult entrance, Burchard extended his arms straight out from his elbows and pushed them back and forth. All 5 of them broke out laughing. Kim turned to the audience for the first time: "We watch a lotta videos on Utube," he explained. "There's this video of a conductor who is not specific about when to come in, and with Beethoven, Da Da Da Duh, he's going. . ."

Otherwise they aren't particularly aware of us. Maybe Kyu-Young Kim is acting a little as he bobs and sways, causing the woman next to me to ask if I like it when they bounce around like that. I do, I do. I love it; he seems to be dancing to the music. Even when he's talking, which he does a lot, his arms curve into the air as though he's dancing. He uses his bow like a wand above him for emphasis. His feet wiggle in time with Burchard's, trying to relax. I have a little crush on this guy.

All of them play so well. Now they're all business. Priscilla periodically blows her nose and looks solemn so often that it's beautiful to see her smile or even grimace once in a while. I hope she feels all right.

In the finale she tries to get people to come in right before her "quirky cello tune" in the Allegro. Once, twice. Nope. First violin Kim gets up and checks with Natalie. That doesn't do it. "We hafta start together." The violins get up and check with the piano. Elissa turns to Kim after one more try and laughs: "That was the whole problem." Huh? I heard how right it sounded, but I had no idea what she did.

Even though I think I know this piece pretty well, I'm checking the program all the time. Ok, here's the Scherzo with its tense pizzicato pulse in the cello. Where's the contrast between meters tho? Oh, here: I got it.

July 26, 2013

Meanwhile the Chamber Music Festival, Steve's last season as treasurer, the 25th Anniversary Season, has begun with a great flurry of concerts: three in a row: First: *David and Friends*, then a fantastic *Founders Concert & Reception*, \$100 a shot--and tonight a third: *A Room of One's Own*, all

women composers. Natalie surely has much expanded the repertoire—several people mentioned her fine contribution as director—but of course there is tremendous energy around David Kim's return after five years.

Somebody had a brilliant idea: present The Benefit Concert in the Lutheran Church, a beautiful venue where we meet every week for our Peace Group. We felt as though we were transported to a 19th Century Salon, a kind of Music with Friends. It's a real sanctuary, a small, beautiful, comfortable room, with great acoustics and a colorful impressionistic window stretching across the wall behind the altar. Last night as we sat watching the light fade behind that window, listening to our two beloved founders, David Kim and Gail Niwa, minus the third, slightly less loved Michelle Djokich who had a prior gig, I know I wasn't the only one who felt sentimental echoes of all those years of superb music-making in Kingston RI.

There was almost a physical response in each of us as Brahms and Mendelssohn swirled around us, David's sweet tone now bolstered by the power of his life experience, Gail's fingers on the keys as strong and nimble as ever while I'm sure her ears could hear her 4 year old Matthew's subdued soprano in the audience—and Priscilla Lee right on as a cellist who feels the music with her whole body. "I couldn't take my eyes off her," said our friend Bunny, a cellist herself.

We did notice that many of us have aged along with our musicians. How will this amazing success sustain itself as we die off? we asked each other. There surely is hope in small RI ventures: two Music Schools in Providence for kids even if you can't pay, modeled on Dudamel's success with low-income kids in Venezuela. But the grim state of the arts in general in these uncertain economic times makes us very sad.

Then I think about Natalie's brave program for the second concert: A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN: all women: Rebecca Clarke as well as the featured Jennifer Higdon, plus Clara Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn. Compared to the first concert, which sold out, this one was not so well attended. Strange contemporary names don't attract our audience, but so what—we need to know what's going on in our own time!

I loved Jennifer Higdon's *Wissahickon poeTrees* with the Talea Ensemble: flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano, percussion. Chris Gross talked about this group, how it's popular now to play chamber music with strings and woodwinds, etc. The piece is "immediately accessible," with familiar harmonies and colors, but sounds new and exciting.

Jennifer Higdon is the age of our kids, b. 1962. She wrote about her piece:

Nature is ominous. It is everything. Everything that exists has in some form sprung from nature. It is powerful, omnipotent and omnipresent. And to try to describe or depict nature in musical language is a nearly impossible task, because even as musicians issue forth choreographed notes from instruments, which themselves are made of materials of nature, no one can even begin to accurately portray that most phenomenal of phenomena.

So she humbly submits to us her work as "homage to that piece of nature within the city of Philadelphia, the Wissahickon Park." And she connects the season movements with "progressing clock" movements, tying them together with increasingly automatic-sounding, unnatural sounds. Wow. What's this, they're playing wine glasses!

The percussion guy plays his xylophone with bows! Even the intervals sound like wind, like fire. For me there's a kind of weird, wonderful synesthesia going on; I can't quite separate the instruments: piano or cello? Xylophone or piano? Flute? Clarinet? After a while I don't care. The rustling of *poeTrees* takes over, and I clock through the seasons, through time, unresisting, along with these amazing musicians.

Natalie programmed this piece and *Aural Hypothesis* by Lei Liang (b. 1972, Tianjin, China, left for the US following the Tienanmin Square events in 1989). There was some flack from the diehards, especially for this second piece, but many in the audience had a great time with it. (On his way to the

airport, David Kim, who wasn't impressed, told Steve that people call this kind of music "screech and farts." Sounds like David, eh.)

We don't know what happened to Lei Liang. But he mentions in his notes that he "came to the realization that I was 'homeless' spiritually and culturally. I developed a strong urge to question everything I had been taught earlier in China, and to discover or create my own spiritual and cultural homeland." He tries in his music to free himself from "the artificial confines of cultural identities, a means to challenge the perceived boundaries and convenient labels. . .building on the richness of resources that crosses historical, cultural, technological and disciplinary boundaries."

The composer talked about "lines" in the piece as a kind of calligraphy, but more basic or primal: "a simple curve or a straight line, drawn slowly with a thin brush with intense attentiveness, or with a thick brush with explosive speed."

The Talia Ensemble's clarinet player asked us to listen for line and texture. Liang describes an "intimate and quiet space," interrupted by a coarse "sonic storm" from the piano. A perfect 'screech' indeed! "Unpredictable forces of nature incorporated into a contemplative space." That could be a description of our new century—Liang's life, for sure, but ours in little Kingston RI as well. Here in our idyllic life we are as baffled and lost as he is, and I hope sometimes as aware of our planet's uncertain future.

July 27, 2013

Hoo boy, this morning Steve and I watched up close & personal as Gail, Ayano, David, Burchard and Priscilla rehearsed the Franck f minor Piano Quintet for over 2 hours. I only wish I could have seen Gail better—no problem hearing her, for sure! What a piece of work they all are, Burchard with his wriggling left foot, his wife's beautiful cello tone, Ayano's supple body response to what she's thinking, her sudden grin, David's seemingly effortless leadership and sometimes wild comments. All of them really serious at the same time. I had my ears in, but during the last movement I had to take them out, it was so loud in the 2nd row. That must be how other people hear, I thought. It sounded shrill to me today, probably a side effect of becoming pretty deaf: either too soft or too loud. . .

August 1, 2013

In one week, 4 concerts, 1 art gallery, 1 poetry group, and lots of walks with Zoe, Nina's rent-a-dog. Luckily the weather broke and we've had a few perfect days. Now I remember why I got so run down last year at this time. This week I've even eschewed walking to concerts. . . after the first one. . .well, and when a tree fell on power lines and police blocked off Biscuit City Rd. for an hour until concert time, I actually biked.

Last night Brian, head of the Festival Board, spoke in honor of two people from the Board—and the second was **Steve Letcher**! He's so modest, Brian said, grinning, that if I ask him to stand up he won't, so I won't ask. . .Brian feels that Steve's done more for the Festival for a very long time than anyone well, maybe founder David Kim—and he enumerated some of the treasurer's responsibilities. In full, these are: maintaining list for mass mailings; recording donations, updating phone messages & website daily; ticket sales, including PO mail, PayPal e-mail & driving around to the different ticket outlets; Excel files and reports, IRS reports, etc. Brian mentioned that since Steve will 'retire' from the treasurer's job next year, they will have to replace him with 3-4 people.

After this encomium I couldn't help myself; I turned to the stranger next to me with whom I'd been talking and said, *he's my husband!*

I also remember how much Steve did to bolster David Kim's self-confidence in the early days of the Festival, and how David felt Steve had become a "father" to him over time. Steve was the first person he ever broached the subject of quitting the festival after 20 years, and when David suggested

stopping altogether Steve was the one who convinced him that he owed it to his 500+ adoring fans to keep it going. It seems David was afraid for his reputation if it might become less popular. Not.

When Steve so enjoyed planning his retirement party ten years ago, saying he'd never get so much attention again, I bet he hadn't bargained on 500+ people clapping vigorously on July 31, 2013 just for him.

July 19, 2014

The Kingston Chamber

Music Festival will begin next week. How relieved Steve is after all not to have so much work to do—especially since their featured item, big shot violinist Hilary Hahn cancelled a couple of days ago. It appears she has injured her arm and is not to play that violin for six weeks. Humpf, says Steve. He looks up several of her other coming engagements, which don't seem to have been notified of this awful news. This news seems to him like a personal affront, since he spent so much time preparing two extra grants to pay for her performance. I don't blame him. If he feels this way, think of how awful her great friend Natalie Zhu must feel as Artistic Director. Susan Hammen-Wynn, KCMF Board Member with Steve, roundly chastised me when I told our Intellectual Knitters yesterday: apparently she thought it was a big secret. She actually used the phrase "let the cat out of the bag." Channing Gray, the ProJo arts critic, had a piece on Hahn all ready yesterday for his newspaper. Apparently there was time to make a substitution. When I told Steve about my sin he actually grinned for the first time that day: it's no secret, he said. Better that people should know sooner than later. But the KCMF Board has agonized over whether to give back money: 1) for the grants Steve got and 2) to disgruntled ticket-holders. They've decided NO on both counts. Good luck—maybe their best bet will be to reserve the grants for another year? It really is a huge problem for Brian, Program Director. Steve doubts that Brian will continue next year. I don't blame him. Steve quit working so hard when the Board climate changed to Business Model.

August 1, 2014

Last night David Ludwig, a contemporary composer who rates a whole program for himself at our Music Festival, gave us *Three Yiddish Dances*, *Five Ladino Songs* and *Canzoniere*, a flute sonata, all written between 2010 and 2012. I'm happy to find that this charming and articulate guy is a perfect in-between person. He is not afraid to borrow and re-form all kinds of influences. He's discovered his Jewish roots, explored his interest in the Ladino language sometimes called "Judeo-Spanish" and its far-reaching culture, now nearly extinct though its music has lately become very popular. So Ludwig reaches out to other cultures to find himself. Wow, me too! I think happily, a little nervously, since my recent ancestors nearly obliterated his. The flute sonata, it turns out, is based on Petrarch's 14th Century poem *Canzoniere* from his collection of sonnets and Monteverdi's madrigal setting of the words. First we hear Ludwig's gorgeous transcription of the Monteverdi madrigal for string quartet, and then his own sonata, which in its first movement uses Monteverdi's 17th C. harmonics "(all of them!) but stretched chords to the extreme ends of the piano's range." We can't see Natalie's fingers on the piano, but watching her small powerful arms fully extended is amazing. She's stretched; we're stretched. How serious she is, here in the intimate setting of the local Lutheran church with its fine acoustics and rented piano:

*And so from a single pure fountain
Flows the sweetness and bitterness of my passion;
A single hand restores me and wounds me.*

In his poem, so typical of the love poems of his age, Petrarch dies of love a thousand times a day and is reborn a thousand times. He's reborn for Monteverdi and once again for Ludwig, who grins: "There's lots of war stuff in my setting." Here he is again, alive for us in the USA in our new disturbing century with strings and flute and harmonies he might not even recognize. Or would he? We're all related, I remember, if you go back far enough in genetics.

July 26, 2015

After the concert, we did have the party on the porch; Indu did cook 6 fantastic Indian dishes for us, including enough chapattis for everyone and even though we did provide a whole chicken, two salads and lots of smoked fish, the 19 of them polished off everything but a little bit of thin-looking yogurt with cukes and radishes! Jason the famous guitarist arrived an hour later to find a lot of empty dishes, but we rustled up a little stuff for him to eat after all. Whew: they had all left by midnight, full of compliments about “real home-cooking” and, surprisingly, the house and Indu’s and my book of poetry, which a couple of them wanted to take home. Then we both collapsed.

The day before we’d spent the whole morning listening to 4 beautiful, very talented young women rehearse David Ludwig’s string quartet, “Pale Blue Dot.” His piece was inspired by the iconic image of earth floating alone in the dark vastness of space from *Voyager* spacecraft, and it is full of eerie glissandos and percussive snaps and crackles as well as soaring melodies and sonorous dips that cover every possible note and technique. As I sat listening to the women working together to interpret Ludwig’s intentions for the piece—he was sitting in the front row, helping them work through the difficult and intricate rhythms and harmonies—every one of us watching the rehearsal felt the charged atmosphere of intense concentration and cooperation between interpreters and creator. I was struck especially by the atmosphere of what Ludwig explained was “musicians at this [exalted] level” working together in such harmony and good humor.

First violin Bella, Ludwig’s very new wife, shared responsibility with each of the others with great sweetness, often looking over at Ludwig as though just by seeing his face she could understand what to do. Jasmine toned down her showmanship; not once did she levitate with excitement. Cellist Priscilla, who has an exciting part with several solo entrances, worked to get just the right tempo for the others to follow. Melissa Reardon, who is married to Raman Ramakrishnan and has performed with many quartets and even the Silk Rd. Ensemble, had lots to say as well. Two hours of intense concentration! I was worn out, but they kept on even past noon to get everything perfect. . . as if anyone of our audience could catch an error anyway.

And now we’re off to hear Ludwig talk about his new baby quartet, inspired by the *Voyager* One interstellar probes, launched 36 years ago, now—I think it’s had one performance before this. Its objective, besides studying the planets of our solar system, was also to “leave our solar system as a message in a bottle, possibly received by some other intelligent species on some other side of the vast ocean of stars. Included is an audio playlist of the most glorious aural art and music, including “Beethoven’s shattering Cavatina from his Op. 130 quartet” a favorite of his.” He wonders in his notes what the Cavatina will sound from thousand or million years from now. The piece lasts I think 16 or 17 minutes!

July 28, 2015

Carrie, age 87; “That program just got better and better!” Besides Ludwig’s quartet there were Jason Vieaux, the returning guitarist who got a standing ovation for a group that included Bach, Albeniz & Duke Ellington—and finally Schumann’s wonderful E-flat Quintet with Hanchien Lee on piano and Raman with Jasmine on 1st violin and Bella and Melissa.

I didn’t agree with Carrie, because I had already fallen in love with Pale Blue Dot and to watch the quartet do a perfect professional rendition of it after their first rehearsal was thrilling. They had added a dramatic entrance: Priscilla appeared on stage with her cello, and as we heard the first ringing repeated opening notes of the two violins and viola, we turned to watch the other members of the quartet move gracefully down the center aisle, circle around their chairs in a human planetary dance—and finally settle into the rest of the music.

July 28, 2017

Only two more chamber music concerts to go—we're feeling the usual exhaustion but of course, we can hardly bear for them to end. Yesterday we had a surprise: a full recital of a familiar, tuneful Mendelssohn Trio with Natalie (not even planned: we sat right under her bench. I watched the incredible agility of her hands from *underneath* her palms, a new perspective) and Priscilla Lee, cello and Juliette Kang, violin. When Priscilla was talking with us beforehand she admitted that they hadn't practiced it at all together—"but of course, we've all played it many times. . ." Also beforehand, a fortuitous announcement: "*There are four movements.*" (So hold your applause, ok.) Plus an extra dose of the Sax Quartet!

All that occurred at a benefit gathering at the posh Dunes Club of Very Rich People, many not usually present at KCM concerts—plus the KCM Board and a couple of us Emeritus Members. We enjoyed liberally flowing wine and not very much in the way of food; how can it be that Tina downed a whole glass & staggered home most pleased with the whole affair?

At a going-away party for Brian after Concert 5 Steve distinguished himself by giving a comprehensive account of everything Brian had done for his 22 or so years as head honcho of the Festival, even quoting from the very first Newsletter. Steve knows that most people have had no idea how much extra time he has spent making sure everything is perfect, from proofreading to feeding the stage hands. During the concert intermission as well there were many tributes to Brian from his faithful stage hands (a perfect choice) and even a video of David Kim honoring him.

August 4, 2018

I'd been looking forward for the whole festival to Terry Schimmel's son Carl's "World Premiere of a Festival Commission: *Vasilissa the Invincible*: Quart for Piano, Violin Viola and Cello." His piece was commissioned by the festival. Wow!

During the pre-concert q&a, two kids asked good questions—Carl's own twins, so cute! Interesting: the girl went first! Carl started out by being valedictorian of SK High, took music lessons from Don Rankin and composition with Geoffrey Gibbs—and kept himself alive by various jobs until he decided rather recently on composing as a career. Praised by the NY Times as "vivid and dramatic," the program noted, his music "is often humorous and dense with literary and musical references." Since 2016, Carl says, he has begun to explore narrative forms, particularly the structural analysis of folktales and character and personality in music. He likes to tell a story in his music.

I got really excited when I read this explanation, including Carl's interest in the fact that all the characters are female, and in the shockingly brutal ending in which Vasilissa's evil stepmother and stepsisters burn to a crisp with the lantern Baba Yaga has given her after 3 impossible tasks—which she accomplishes with the help of a magical doll her dying mother had given her. A Cinderella story with a twist.

Carl sees Vasilissa's victory not as heroic; *she does nothing of her own accord*. She's not even brave, just good. The evil witch actually becomes her helper. And the source of her strength "*(and arguably the true protagonist) is the little doll which has been given to her by her mother—her mother's "blessing."* Parental love transforms her, even in death. As a parent, Carl likes this idea a lot—& that the Clarosa Quartet takes its name from the children of the principal players!

July 30, 2021

Time is going by too fast this summer: here's August right around the corner. We've already had 3 concerts from the Kingston Chamber Musicians, all very inspiring, almost too much for this old couple! We go very early so Steve can park and walk into the Fine Arts Center the shortest way. I wasn't looking forward much to the latest concert, The Nightingale's Sonata, by Thomas Wolf, about his book. It was built around Cesar Franck's sonata of the same name—and the story of his

grandmother, Lea Luboshutz, one of the first internationally known female violinists. Natalie Zhu and Ayano Nimomiya played the sonata, with comments by the author. Of course Wolf wanted book sales, but his comments were wonderful and the two women played beautifully—when they weren't sitting in the shadows listening to him read! Now there are only two more concerts: All Time Favorites tomorrow and Spirit of Hungary Sunday afternoon. Of course Jim Findlay is planning to attend that last one; their sabbatical year in the country was pretty much the crowning glory of his life—if not quite so exciting for his wife. Par for the course.

Surprise: We just had an early morning walk with the Festival leader, Natalie Zhu! She called, came over, we strolled. It was wonderful. We caught up on her daughter Clara and all the kid's stellar activities in her new Private School, including making a video melange of sight and sound, not to mention amazing height at age 11, way taller than either of her parents. Of course Natalie is already working on the program for next year, including some big names. Wow. We were very touched. p.s. I was also surprised to discover that our famous friend Ms.Zhu is afraid of dogs.