



Up close and personal with chamber music

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While many students are spending the last few weeks of their summer holidays sleeping in and lounging around the house, a group of youths has been in school, so to speak, for the past two weeks at Appleby College.

The ivy-covered campus has been home to 22 young adults who have converged for the Southern Ontario Chamber Music Institute. The two-week session is for classical musicians who want to improve their skills by focusing on chamber music.

Chamber music, defined literally, is room music. It is meant to be played by small ensembles of musicians, generally trios, quartets and quintets.

The institute is geared towards ensembles of string players, so it welcomes violinists, violists and cellists. One or two pianists are also invited, permitting the creation of a piano trio.

Admission is by audition only. This year, close to 50 string players and a handful of pianists from across North America sent in audition tapes.

James Kim, an Oakville youth who has studied the violin for the past eight years, is one of the talented students who was admitted. This is his second year at the institute.

"Last year, it was an amazing experience," said Kim, 19. "I really learned discipline, especially as a musician in a small group. I also made a lot of friends last year, so I wanted to come back."

Although Kim is attending McMaster University in the fall for science with the hope of becoming a doctor, he said he will always keep music in his life.

"Einstein is my role model because not only was he a great physicist, he was also a violinist," Kim said. "I will always be playing in some form and have music around."

The Southern Ontario Chamber Music Institute has grown leaps and bounds since its inception 20 years ago. This year's institute runs August 4 to 17.

Organizers of the institute say it is the only one of its kind in Canada. It



TAKING NOTES: Musicians were busy the past two weeks at the Southern Ontario Chamber Music Institute. Here, composer Abigail Richardson with husband and conductor Michael Schulte.



TAKING NOTES: Musicians were busy the past two weeks at the Southern Ontario Chamber Music Institute. Shown here, piano trio (left to right) Annie Foreman-Mackey, Emilee-Mae Feely and Bryan Lu.



has attracted many musicians who have gone on to illustrious musical careers over the years. Some of these graduates come back and serve as instructors.

Professional ensemble musicians from reputable chamber music groups also work with the young musicians. This year, members of the Penderecki String Quartet and the Afiara String Quartet are sharing their expertise with the youths.

Adrian Fung, cellist with the San Francisco-based Afiara String Quartet, attended the institute when he was 15 and is now back as an instructor. It is rewarding coming full circle, he said.

"Coming here changed my life," Fung said. "It was central to my decision to become a professional musician. There is such an incredible passion for chamber music here."

He attended for two years, saying he experienced extensive musical growth during that time.

"I think chamber music is the most essential part of music making," he said. "You are playing in such a small group, so if you play poorly, you let the other musicians down. You have to become the best musician you can be, and that is an invaluable lesson. So many students don't get exposed to chamber music until university, but here they are playing chamber music as young as age 12 and 13."

Days are long for students, but neither they nor the instructors seem to mind.

A typical day starts just after 9 a.m., with full chamber orchestra rehearsal running for an hour, followed by two individual lessons with members of the professional quartets and two ensemble rehearsals. Lunch and dinner are slotted in, with musicians spending additional hours rehearsing on their own on campus.

Evenings are filled with concerts by faculty, lectures and masterclasses. Weekends are no exception, with scheduling continuing the same as weekdays.

Students are divided into ensembles in advance of coming to the institute based on their performance levels.

Repertoire is also selected ahead of time and mailed to students, with works by composers like Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn, Dvorak, Prokofiev and Tchaikovsky.

It is a wonderful two weeks of music making, according to Michael Schulte, a Toronto-based violinist. He started as an instructor with the institute in 1993 and has returned every year since.

"Musicians learn all kinds of interesting skills here they might not get elsewhere," said Schulte, who is conducting this year's chamber orchestra. "They need independence of thought when playing chamber music. They have their own line and they have to learn to shape phrases independently."

Schulte said that while students grow musically during the week, they also mature socially.

"This institute teaches life skills," he said.

"For chamber music, you have to negotiate with other players on a verbal level, which is a real challenge. They learn team playing skills, knowledge of how to clean the slate after interpersonal difficulties, and how to

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TAKING NOTES: Musicians were busy the past two weeks at the Southern Ontario Chamber Music Institute. Here, Michael Schulte conducts the chamber orchestra.

calm down after a blowout. These translate to the real world."

Another attractive aspect of the institute is its composer-in-residence program. Each year, one composer is invited to write a piece for the students and work with the youth during the two-week session.

This year's composer is Abigail Richardson, an affiliate composer with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. She has gone the additional mile by not only writing a youth-friendly piece for chamber orchestra, but also leaving it up to the students to label it. Currently, the working title is *You Name It* until its official title is revealed at the Saturday, Aug. 16 concert.

"One way to get kids involved is to name it, so they can come up with the title after playing the piece," Richardson said. "Titles are imposed on students for music, so this opens their mind to the piece and what they think it is about."

Richardson says she is a contemporary composer who is trying to get musicians to think outside of the box. She spent the two weeks opening students' minds by bringing in world instruments, as well as ones she created herself, like the oven rack harp and turkey baster flute.

Her piece, *You Name It*, breaks traditional chamber orchestra boundaries by getting students to sing while they play, as well as use their instruments in creative ways.

"I wanted to write a piece that was creative and got kids doing something strange with their instruments," said Richardson. "The piece calls for them to do some improvisation, with things like glissandos sliding down and playing at their own speed."

As husband and wife, Richardson and Schulte have a great working relationship, they say. Richardson adds that her partner always knows what she means to say musically.

"When Michael conducts my music, I never say a word about interpretation, he knows it inside out without me saying anything, which is rare," she said. "Usually, I have comments and instructions for conductors, but Michael just gets it immediately."

Schulte sheepishly agrees.

"I know Abby, and how she thinks and feels about music and how she writes, so I have an advantage," he said.

The opportunity to work with Richardson is what attracted 17-year-old Annie Foreman-Mackey to the institute.

The Kingston-based violinist had the chance to meet the composer at a workshop held recently in Toronto.

"It is nice she is here because then you can know exactly what she wants you to play at certain parts of the piece," Foreman-Mackey said. "Usually, I play pieces by composers who are dead, so it is neat to have the composer here so you know what to do. It is a very neat piece."

The 20th Anniversary Celebration Homecoming Gala and Concert will be held Saturday, Aug. 16 at Willis Hall at Appleby College, 540 Lakeshore Rd. W. at 8 p.m. The Southern Ontario Chamber Music Institute Student Showcase runs Sunday, Aug. 17 at 2 p.m. at Willis Hall at Appleby College.

Tickets cost \$10 to \$30 per concert. For tickets or information, call the Oakville Centre box office at 905-815-2021. For information on the institute, go online to www.socmi.org.

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