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All students at Kinhaven Music School perform in the camp's choir in addition to playing their instruments.
 (Vyto Starinskas / Staff Photo)

Growing Young Virtuosos in a Healthy Vermont Environment

By Jim Lowe

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A quartet of high school-age string players has just executed a series of recurring short notes in Dmitri Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 3 when the musicians are stopped by their coach. "What's the character?" asks Deborah Buck, first violinist of the renowned Lark Quartet.

"Spiders!" responds one, with a laugh.

"Can you play with a little resistance?" Buck asks, helping them define the character.

Buck borrows the first violinist's instrument and demonstrates, giving the notes an edgy feeling.

"If it was Mozart or Beethoven, it would be very different," Buck says, referring to the refined Classical style of those composers. They try again, this time with Shostakovich's quirky edginess.

"Very nice," says Buck. The rehearsal is one of many going on at Kinhaven Music School, a summer camp in rural Weston for serious young classical music students. The four string players are preparing for the concerts this weekend, the final performances of the year. (They are free and open to the public.)

For six weeks, 95 students, ages 13 to 18, have been spending their days learning, practicing and playing — and having fun — with the nine string faculty, three brass, five woodwind, two piano and lone percussion as well as the composer in residence. Selected by audition, the students range from intermediate to advanced. Some will go on to professional careers, while others will choose other paths but remain educated music lovers.

One of the violinists rehearsing the Shostakovich is going on to study music education. Jenna Jordan, an 18-year-old violinist from Landgrove, the only Vermont participant this summer (though there have been many), will attend Ithaca College in the fall. The recent Burr and Burton Academy graduate has been attending Kinhaven concerts since she was a young child, but this is her first summer as a participant.

“I was always attending other camps during the summer,” she said. “This year, I had outgrown my other camps, so I thought this was the year to try it out.”

Kinhaven’s regimen turned out to be a tough one. Wake-up bell is at 7:15, breakfast at 7:30. After breakfast, it’s work crew — rotating as waiters, dishwashers or pot washers or helping with campus maintenance. At 8:30 a.m., it’s a private lesson or private practice time; 9:30 is chamber orchestra, large ensemble for brass and winds, or chorus. Chamber music coaching sessions like the Shostakovich quartet are at 10:30, followed at 11:30 by either a private lesson or practice. Lunch is at 1 p.m. Then the students are free for nonmusical activities until dinner.

“In the afternoons, they give us time to relax — do arts and crafts, go in the pond, stuff like that, or practice if we want,” Jordan said. “So there’s a really good balance of working hard, getting the music done, but still having fun and having the camp experience.”

After dinner it’s orchestra from 7:30 to 9:30, and lights out at 11.

“It’s amazing. I love it,” Jordan said. “I wish I had started coming sooner. This is the last year I can come.”

Buck and her husband, trombonist Anthony Mazzocchi, became executive directors last year, replacing Nancy and Jerry Bidlack (he still conducts the chorus). The school was founded in 1952 by David and Dorothy Dushkin as a chamber music and chorus camp. It grew continually and, in 1990, the two week junior session was tacked on after the regular session.

Kinhaven is now at another crossroads. Buck and Mazzocchi are working to expand the nonprofit school’s scope, increase scholarship aid and raise the student level to compete with summer schools like those at Interlochen and Tanglewood. Although a successful 10-year, \$2 million capital campaign resulted in new buildings, most of the financing comes from tuition. For that to change, Mazzocchi is looking at former students who are successful musicians or doctors, lawyers and business people.

“We haven’t tapped into our alumni for help, and they want to help,” Mazzocchi said. “We’re going to reconnect. We want to grow.”

But grow without losing what makes Kinhaven special, he said. “Here you have some freedoms and some time to enjoy being a kid as well,” Mazzocchi said.

“Unlike the places that I attended, the kids have access to us all the time,” Buck said. “We eat with them, we hang out with them, we play baseball with them. I wish I had had access like that to my professors growing up.”

That individual attention pays off. One of this summer’s students came having had no formal lessons, which were unaffordable for him. His teachers chipped in and, with a scholarship from the camp, got him to Kinhaven. In a recent orchestra concert he played the flute solo in Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7.

“He’s never played in orchestra before,” Buck said. “It was unbelievable, it was so beautiful. There wasn’t a dry eye in the faculty.

“That’s what this place is about, and he’s thriving here.”

Kinhaven Music School’s final student concerts of the 2011 senior session are Saturday at 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. and Sunday at 10 a.m. at the school’s concert hall, 354 Lawrence Hill Road in Weston. The concerts are free and open to the public. For information about the concerts or Kinhaven’s programs, go online to kinhaven.org.