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Kinhaven provides concentrated doses of music education

By Josh O’Gorman Herald Staff

WESTON — The von Trapps are not the only ones making the hills come alive with the sound of music.

Since 1952, Kinhaven Music School — spread out over 31 acres off Route 100 just north of the village — has been a school, home and refuge for classical music students and teachers alike.

“We all love Kinhaven. It’s become part of our blood,” said Jerry T. Bidlack, who has taught at the school since 1967 and is now director emeritus.

When Bidlack first came to the school more than 40 years ago, it was still operated by its founders, David and Dorothy Dushkin. While David Dushkin was a pianist, his brother, Samuel Dushkin, was a renowned violinist and the two traveled the world premiering most of Stravinsky’s works for solo violin, Bidlack said.

David Dushkin met his wife Dorothy while in France and the two married and settled in Illinois and opened a music school, Bidlack said. Soon, David felt more intensive music education might be more productive for his students.

“In the 1940s, he saw that kids were taken away from their music by sports and ballet and the myriad things they get involved in,” Bidlack said. “David thought if he could have the kids for 24 hours, it would be better than one hour a week for a year.”

The Dushkins first came to Weston in 1949 at the invitation of a friend and in 1952 taught their first summer session of students, composed of 19 children from Weston who walked up Lawrence Hill Road to the farm.

“When he recruited students, he was more interested in the kid than in how they played,” Bidlack said. “If a student wasn’t a good musician, he would teach them to play the recorder.”

By the 1960s, Bidlack said, the school was hosting as many as 70 students a summer. Originally, the children stayed in tents on platforms, and over time Dushkin built cabins upon the platforms.

Today, the property is dotted with more than a dozen small buildings — some less than 8 feet square — with musical names like Crescendo, Fortissimo and Decrescendo.

Many of these buildings have reached the end of their life span, said Adam Grabois, former Kinhaven student, now a professional cellist living in New York City and president of Kinhaven’s board of trustees.

“We’re in the middle of a capital campaign to replace some of those buildings,” Grabois said. “We’ve raised about \$800,000 and we’re hoping to double that.”

The school now hosts two sessions for junior and senior students. About 90 students attended this year’s senior session June 20-Aug. 3, and last week about 65 elementary and middle school students arrived for the junior session Aug. 9-24.

Varun Shankar, 11, of Southborough, Mass., said this is his second year at Kinhaven. Shankar said he has been playing violin for seven years and hopes one day to play in the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

“I came back because I thought it was a very good camp and it was the best sleep-away camp I’ve been to,” Varun said. “Plus, the food is great. I’m a vegetarian and there’s always a vegetarian option.”

In between lessons, Varun played basketball with his fellow campers, one of many recreational activities available on site.

To walk across the grounds is to hear music, from a brass quartet practicing outside next to the pond to string quartets practicing in tiny practice rooms and individuals practicing scales on the lawn.

Abigail Soloway, 12, of Weston, Conn., has been playing violin since she was 4 years old.

“I don’t remember what it was like, but I’m sure it was very squeaky,” Soloway said of her first years playing violin.

Abigail said this is her first time at an overnight camp.

“I think everyone here is helping each other because it’s nice to have so many people to play chamber music with who like to play chamber music,” Abigail said.

As she walked across the lawn toward the dining hall, her violin teacher, Naho Tsutsui, reminded Abigail to put her violin away in case it rained.

Tsutsui now resides in New York City and has taught at Kinhaven for five years, but she first came to the camp as a student from her native Japan.

“Once you get involved, you tend to stay here,” Tsutsui said.

For more information on Kinhaven and its capital campaign, visit www.kinhaven.org.



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Catherine Edwards practices in the concert hall at the Kinhaven Music School in Weston.

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