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CELEBRATING

FABULOUS YEARS
on the ROAD

Musicians from Marlboro, the touring arm of the renowned Marlboro Music Festival, continues its tradition of blending players young and experienced with music fresh and familiar.

BY Kyle MacMillan

When Samuel Rhodes first went on the road with the newly founded Musicians from Marlboro in 1966, the 25-year-old violist was three years away from joining the celebrated Juilliard String Quartet and still trying to get his bearings as a touring artist. He looked to the two veteran players on the tour for both musical guidance and pointers on dealing with the rigors of non-stop travel.

Now an esteemed master who guides upstarts as fresh-faced as he once was, Rhodes is one of the scores of success stories behind the Musicians from Marlboro, an outgrowth of the famed Marlboro Music Festival. The one-of-a-kind touring program, which is marking its fiftieth anniversary in 2015-16, has had a huge impact on the North American chamber music scene both in honing young talent and providing unusual performances to audiences coast to coast.

Most touring chamber music ensembles have fixed rosters. But Musicians from Marlboro is different. First, its annual tours combine ever-changing line-ups of noted veterans with promising young talents, a mix designed to spark concerts with fresh energy and insights. Second, it often features works with offbeat combinations of instruments and voices that audiences might not have a chance to hear otherwise. A typical example, plucked from Marlboro's long history, is Robert Schumann's

Andante and Variations for Two Pianos, Two Cellos and Horn in B Flat Major, which a Marlboro group performed in 1981–82. "That's a very strange, unique combination, but Marlboro has the ability to put on something like that," said Rhodes, who teaches at New York's Juilliard School and Manhattan School of Music.

Frank Salomon, a co-administrator of the Marlboro Music Festival since 1960, estimates that at least 500 musicians have performed as part of Musicians from Marlboro, and the list of alumni contains some of the most important names in American chamber music. In addition to such prominent pianists as Yefim Bronfman, Jeremy Denk, Murray Perahia and Andrés Schiff, many elite ensembles past and present have included former participants, including the Brentano, Emerson, Guarneri and St. Lawrence quartets, and the Beaux Arts, Eroica and Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson trios. "You could say," Rhodes said, "that most of the prominent chamber-music players, certainly in the United States and even internationally, have come through that program and have been at one time or another part of a Musicians from Marlboro group."

Many of those artists are quick to tout the impact that Musicians from Marlboro had on them and their careers. Famed pianist Jonathan Biss, who took part in four of the organization's tours starting in 1998 at age 18, found out what it was like to hone an interpretation of a musical work across a series of performances, building trust with his colleagues and the confidence to experiment without



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going too far. “I think I learned a lot about that,” he said, “and then also just the realities of touring, what it means to be in a different city every day and be tired quite a lot of the time but still have to go onstage and give your best, and how to deal with making sure that you take care of yourself.”

Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt, violist of the fast-rising Dover Quartet, toured with Musicians from Marlboro in the fall of 2012, just before she turned 24 and shortly before the Dover’s victory at the 2013 Banff International String Quartet Competition catapulted it onto the international scene. She already had spent some time on the road with her quartet but still gained considerably from the experience. “We didn’t feel like we had that much time,” she said, “but somehow by the end of the tour we felt like we knew the pieces as though we’d be playing them for years. It was so amazing, only playing with those people for a couple of weeks, to see how much the performances would change and how much more free everyone would get and how quickly people can learn to read each other’s body language and kind of telepathic energies intuitively.”

The Marlboro Music Festival was founded in 1951 by celebrated pianist Rudolf Serkin, who remained artistic director until his death in 1991, along with Adolf and Herman Busch and Marcel, Blanche and Louis Moysé—all eminent classical musicians of the day. The seven-week festival takes place on the campus of the Marlboro College in

Marlboro, Vermont, a town of about 1,000 residents in the wooded Green Mountains. The isolated location was intentional, ensuring that the focus of the participants was on the music and not outside distractions.

A key part of the experience was to provide participants with the kind of time to really delve into a musical work that simply isn’t possible in most other settings and is all but impossible for professional, touring musicians who leap-frog across the planet from one concert to the next. That’s a big reason why Biss has made a point of returning to Marlboro every other year since 2006 for four or five weeks—the longest block of time he spends anywhere in a year, including his own home.

“Only after I left school,” he said, “and went into the professional world did I realize that the norm is that everything you do feels under-rehearsed. That’s when Marlboro started to seem more and more miraculous to me, because what Marlboro’s really about is living like a student—the idea of having time to explore, experiment and fail sometimes.”

Another key part of the Marlboro experience was the idea of having veteran artists rehearse and perform side-by-side with promising musicians on the cusp of professional careers. While there is no doubt a master-apprentice dynamic, the musicians interact more or less as equals, with the younger players gaining knowledge and experience from their older colleagues, who in turn get recharged with fresh ideas and energy.

In the early years, famed musicians such as Serkin, cellists Pablo Casals and Madeline Foley and violinist Alexander Schneider served as mentors and teachers,



OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT: In 1977, nine stellar wind players, who became principals of such orchestras as the National Symphony and Orpheus, performed the seldom-played Gounod's *Petite Symphonie*, together with octets by Beethoven and Mozart. RIGHT: Violist Milena Parjaro-van de Stadt

LEFT: Krzysztof Penderecki, Marlboro 2013 Resident Composer, with Mendelssohn Quartet founding cellist Marcy Rosen, who joined in performing his *Clarinet Quartet* on tour in January 2016. BOTTOM LEFT: Resident Composer John Harbison's *Twilight Music* was performed by Radovan Vlatkovic, horn; Jessica Lee, violin; and pianist Jeremy Denk in March 2006 on a national tour. BOTTOM RIGHT: Mezzo-soprano Mary Burgess and tenor Jon Humphrey sang Schumann and Dvořák duets in *Musicians* from Marlboro's very first season.

and they have since been replaced by succeeding generations of notable performers, like cellist Peter Wiley and Rhodes, most of whom attended the festival as aspiring professionals.

Even though she is too young to have met the legendary musicians who took part in Marlboro early on, Pajoro-van de Stadt said she nonetheless feels close to them. "My direct mentors and idols," she said, "people who are maybe one or two generations above me, passed down that lineage and that respect so strongly that it feels almost as though the people in my generation have had first-hand experience with these [early] artists and these [early] mentors and teachers. The traditions at Marlboro are so strong that you really feel a sense of family."

In 1965-66, at the suggestion of influential artist manager William Judd, Serkin launched the *Musicians* from Marlboro as a way to bring the festival's spirit to audiences who weren't able to make the trek to Vermont. The diversity of programming was apparent from the start, with the first tours including string sextets by William Byrd and Arnold Schoenberg, vocal duets by Antonín Dvořák and Robert Schumann, a string trio by Irving Fine and a piano quartet by Felix Mendelssohn. Perhaps even more remarkable was the number of young artists who took part in the inaugural touring season who went on to major careers, including violinists Jaime Laredo and Arnold Steinhardt, soprano Benita Valente and pianists Richard Goode and Peter Serkin.

From the beginning, each of the tours consisted of at least one well-known, seasoned musician along with younger musicians, many of whom were getting some of their first experiences on the road. For his 1966 tour, Rhodes, violinist Jaime Laredo and pianist Ruth Laredo were teamed with two veterans, the Madeline Foley and contralto Florence Kopleff. "Madeline was a very special musician," Rhodes said, "and all of us treasured the moments we were privileged to be with her. Certainly, we got to see a lot of her and how she worked and how we would react to it."

Marlboro officials believe that its ensembles were the first in the United States to tour such works as Dmitri Shostakovich's "Songs from Jewish Folk Poetry," Op. 79 (featured in 1967-68), Messiaen's "Quartet for the End of the Time" (1970-71) and Paul Hindemith's Octet (1984-85). Messiaen's famed quartet was performed by noted violinist Felix Galimir and three young artists—Goode,

cellist Nathaniel Rosen, and clarinetist Richard Stoltzman, who would go on to make a noted recording of this piece. In addition, *Musicians* from Marlboro has presented contemporary works by festival composers-in-residence like Thomas Adès, John Harbison and György Kurtág.

Goode and pianist Mitsuko Uchida, who served as co-artistic directors from 1999-2013 (Uchida remains the sole artistic director), sought to tie the tours even more closely with the festival by basing each touring program around a work that had emerged as a consensus highlight of a recent previous summer at Marlboro. "Certain things just absolutely stand out," Goode said. "When people really click and you sense an electricity in the performance, it's kind of generally felt." The centerpiece, for example, of a January tour featuring Anthony McGill, principal clarinetist of the New York Philharmonic, was Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki's infrequently heard *Quartet for Clarinet and String Trio* (1993), a focal point of the 2013 festival.

In 2015-16, like most recent years, four different *Musicians* from Marlboro groups are touring. Three of the ensembles are performing in five venues that regularly present three concerts each year featuring the *Musicians* from Marlboro, including Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall in New York City, the Isabella Gardner Museum in Boston and the Freer and Sackler Galleries in Washington, D.C. The Freer Gallery has a long history with the festival, starting when Agnes Meyer, one of the institution's early benefactors, helped secure visas for Serkin and Busch to come to the United States during World War II. When the gallery's renovated auditorium re-opened in 1998, it was named the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Auditorium, and Meyer's descendants continue to fund the concert series



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: Pianist Jonathan Biss; Soovin Kim, David McCarroll, Artistic Director Mitsuko Uchida, Matthew Zalkind, and Milena Pajaro-van de Stadt prepare the Faure *Piano Quintet in F Minor* in Vermont in 2012; violinist Hiroko Yajima, pianist Murray Perahia, clarinetist Elsa Ludewig, and cellist Leslie Parnas (not pictured) played the rarely-heard Hindemith *Clarinet Quartet* on tour in 1968.



there, including the annual appearances of the Musicians from Marlboro.

Another group, featuring Rhodes and veteran pianist Cynthia Raim along with three young artists—violinists Robin Scott and Itamar Zorman and cellist Brook Speltz—performs an eight-city tour elsewhere in North America. Its itinerary begins March 30 in Denver and concludes April 17, with a stop along the way at the Phoenix Chamber Music Society. That organization presents a Marlboro group every other year, and those concerts are typically among the largest draws of the season, with audiences nearly filling the 600-seat church where the series presents its concerts. “It’s a big name that audiences recognize as the best,” said Janet Green, the society’s executive director. “So, they always know that they’re going to get a fabulous concert and they’ll probably see one of the superstars plus get to hear people that are going to be the next superstars.”

In addition to the time they collaborated during a previous summer at the Marlboro festival, the touring groups are typically together for about two weeks, which includes five to six days for rehearsals and five to seven concerts spread out over eight or nine days. Although not as long or intense as the festival itself, the tours nonetheless still provide enough time for the participants to bond and experience some of the same musical chemistry. “I think the tours very often are these magical experiences, because they are rooted in that time that the group spent together in the summer,” Biss said.

In addition to serious music-making during these trips, there is inevitably room for some of the pranks that have long characterized summers at Marlboro. Biss recalls a concert when his touring colleagues surprised him with children’s stickers spread across his score, causing him to have a laughing fit during the somber slow movement of Johannes Brahms’ Horn Trio. “Those things do happen on Marlboro tours,” he said. “So, it’s not grim business.”

Even though a limited number of college and university series are presenting classical music these days and some longtime presenters are shutting down (the Tuesday Musical Concert Series in Omaha, Nebraska, ceased operations in 2015 after 123 years), Salomon is confident that Musicians from Marlboro can continue to flourish. To that end, he is working to establish endowment funds that assure the long-term financial viability of its three-concert series at the five East Coast venues as well as

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annual performances in certain cities elsewhere. So far, the concerts at Carnegie Hall and annual concerts in Montreal and Toronto have been permanently endowed in this way.

Goode is convinced that the values that have undergirded Musicians from Marlboro during its first 50 years will continue to serve the series well and allow it to overcome the vicissitudes of audience tastes and changing competition. “Maybe I should be concerned about its future,” he said, “but I’m not. As long as the standards remain high, I don’t see any reason why it shouldn’t continue being great.”

Meanwhile, Pajaro-van de Stadt is still hoping to come back for the third season that was part of her original acceptance to the Marlboro festival and to maybe even take part in another tour. It’s just a matter of trying to fit it into her ever-busier performing schedule with the Dover Quartet. “I will admit to you that I’m still biding my time,” she said. “I just haven’t been able to go back and I really want to. If I think about it, it’s my musical paradise.”

Kyle MacMillan served as classical music critic for the Denver Post from 2000 through 2011. He currently freelances in Chicago, writing for such publications as the Chicago Sun-Times, Wall Street Journal, and Opera News.



Photos: Marlboro Music Festival archives