

# Low Profile, High Art

*Many summer music hotspots are to be found near vacation destinations and resorts, but the Central Vermont Chamber Music Festival cultivates the ensemble art form in a quiet community that has more farms than tourists.*

BY Peter W. Goodman PHOTOGRAPHY BY BOB EDDY



The Guilford Welcome Center, on Interstate 91 just north of the Massachusetts line, is meant to give visitors their first Vermont experience. It has buildings shaped like barns, old farm equipment, displays of cheese, that wonderful aroma of loam and manure, and lots of pamphlets and maps showing places to go and things to do: Brattleboro, Bennington, Burlington, Stowe, Rutland, the Northeast Kingdom. Skiing, hiking, rafting, swimming, music.

It doesn't have anything about Randolph. There is no skiing in Randolph. Its rivers don't offer exciting whitewater adventures. Neither the Appalachian nor the Long Trail passes through. There are no big Green Mountains in Randolph.

A town of about five thousand people that's close to the center of the state, Randolph has nothing that especially draws in the "flatlanders," as tourists and condo-owning out-of-staters are known. Randolph has farms, a few small factories, a hospital, a few blocks of a brick Main Street, and it's an Amtrak whistlestop.

Yet the town is in a beautiful location, nestled in a valley at the juncture of two branches of the White River, with views that resemble Wales without the mines. Pretty, not picturesque.

"It's not Stowe, it's not touristy, it's not a ski area, it's nothing like that," says Peter Sanders, a cellist in the New York City Ballet Orchestra who has summered in Randolph since his parents brought him there when he was an infant.

"It's an interesting town," says New York City-based composer Nico Muhly, who was born in Randolph at Gifford Memorial Hospital and who also comes back in summer (his mother now lives in what is technically the hamlet of Tunbridge, on the Randolph border). "It doesn't have that sort of cloying postcard effect. It's a real place where real people live."

Among the real people, in colonial days, was one-time town clerk Justin Morgan. Morgan (1747–98) was also a farmer, composer and horse breeder. His stallion Figure was the original Morgan horse,



FESTIVAL MUSICIANS, GUEST ARTISTS, AND CHILDREN: (l to r) Violinist Basia Danilow, Harrison Hollingsworth (violin/bassoon, Sixth Floor Trio), Neal Whitney, Teddy Abrams (piano/clarinet, Sixth Floor Trio), cellist Peter Sanders, Aniela Sanders, violinist Adela Peña, Erich Sanders, Johnny Teyssier (clarinet, Sixth Floor Trio), and violist David Cerutti

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It's a real place, where real people live."* —Nico Muhly



**SOUNDCHECK IN  
WOODSTOCK:** Rehearsing  
the Glazunov Quintet are  
Arturo Delmoni and  
Cyrus Beroukhim, violins;  
Peter Sanders and Alistair  
MacRae, cellos; and  
Michael Roth, viola

one of the nation's most popular breeds (Civil War generals Stonewall Jackson and Phil Sheridan both rode Morgans). Figure is buried in Tunbridge, and Morgan in the Randolph Center Cemetery. Horses are not so much in evidence around town these days, but music is—and Morgan was also a composer known for his hymns and fuguig tunes.

The thought of music brings to mind something exceptional that Randolph *does* have: Chandler Music Hall—a century-old, wood-paneled, acoustically superb concert space that seats about six hundred people. And because it has the Chandler Music Hall, Randolph has the Central Vermont Chamber Music Festival, two weekends in late August when high-level players from elsewhere offer some serious performances before small but appreciative audiences.

Sanders, the cellist, founded the festival in the summer of 1993. It was his mother, Marion, who suggested he take a look at the hall in town. “She said, ‘You’ve got this beautiful hall here, maybe it’s time for you to think about doing this.’ And I looked at her like she was crazy: ‘What are you talking about? I don’t want to deal with this.’”

But Sanders did take a look; and after talking with Laura Morris, the hall’s administrator at the time, decided to take a chance. He called a few of his musician friends. “And I said, ‘look, I’m starting this thing, do you guys want to come up and do this?’”

Which they did, and they played, and they loved the hall, and they had a good audience. “That season went off really well,” Sanders says. “Everybody was very happy.”

Now approaching its 20th season, the festival has grown slowly and not by much. Yet its two weekends of events include run-outs to Woodstock and Montpelier, the state capital; a children’s concert; open rehearsals; and a special set of programs in March at Randolph Union High School. Programming is broad but not radical: the 2011 season included Schubert, Glazunov, Suk, Schumann, Bach, and the 20th-century English composer E. J. Moeran. There have been occasional woodwinds (last summer offered a young people’s concert by the Sixth Floor Trio—a youthful, multi-genre clarinet, bassoon, violin/piano ensemble that formed at Curtis Institute), but by and large the festival focuses on the string literature.

The musicians are mostly from New York—the best known, among chamber musicians, are perhaps the violinist/violist Arturo Delmoni and violinist Adela Peña, formerly of the Eroica Trio. In the final week of the 2011 season, Sanders was joined by his wife, violinist Basia Danilow, of the Lark Quartet, as well as Peña; violist David Cerutti, co-principal of the Orchestra of St. Luke’s; and the young pianist Jeewon Park, still early in her career.

“The Central Vermont Chamber Music Festival functions at a high



**Left: Main Street in Randolph.**  
**Below: Central Vermont CMF’s founding director, Peter Sanders (foreground), prepares for a concert with Adela Peña and Cyrus Beroukhim.**

level,” said Jim Lowe, a former CAMI executive who is music critic of the *Barre-Montpelier Times-Argus*. “Arturo [Delmoni] is very good; Adela Peña is also very good. There have been various people over the years who have been just very good.

“It is a very unpretentious festival, just people who get together because they want to play together.”

It may be unpretentious, but in its 19 years of existence, the festival has done something very important for the community. The cartoonist Ed Koren, probably best known for his work in the *New Yorker*, has lived in nearby Brookfield for more than 25 years. To Koren, the festival gives the community “a nice jolt, an espresso of music . . . for the few weeks of the season they are performing.”

That the festival has been so long-lived impresses Koren. “A lot of it is due to Peter’s energy and drive to keep it afloat,” he says. “I’m indebted to him. Without the festival, Randolph would be diminished.”

There is something very low-key Vermont about the festival, just as there is about the town. Nevertheless, both the musicians and the citizens have a deep desire for excellence and are willing to work hard. The downtown area was virtually destroyed by a series of fires in the early 1990s, but the townspeople rallied, created the Randolph Area Community Development Corp., and have rebuilt.

As impressive, and more to our point, is what has been done with Chandler Hall itself. Built in 1907 as a gift from Randolph citizen Albert B. Chandler, the structure had been deteriorating. So, with state and federal funds, foundation grants and gifts from individuals, money was raised for a massive renovation and construction project. It worked.



“There’s the successful \$3.5 million fund drive—in a town of five thousand in the middle of the great recession—for additions and renovations to the building to kick off its second century,” says M. Dickey Drysdale, editor and publisher of the *Herald of Randolph* newspaper. He and his wife, Marjorie, have themselves been linchpins of Randolph’s musical community: He is the longtime music director of the Randolph Singers; she is a soprano who sings with orchestras and chamber groups throughout the state, and directs a choral group called Sounding Joy.

The renovation did not touch the interior of the hall itself—it didn’t even get a new paint job—but added rehearsal space, dressing and green rooms, a new lobby, and improvements to the adjoining art gallery, for a complex now called the Chandler Center for the Arts.

“It is the perfect space for chamber music,” Nico Muhly says. (He is writing a piece to help celebrate the 20th anniversary.) “For me it has a really wonderful acoustic. String quartets sound great, pianos sound great. It’s a good old, solid piece of machinery.”

The chamber music festival is far from the only activity in the hall. As far as star-powered classical music is concerned, Midori gave a recital several years ago, and the pianist Simone Dinnerstein has been up three years in a row—in 2011 with clarinetist Richard Stoltzman. And that doesn’t begin to cover all the events scheduled during the year, including the remarkable New World Festival, every Labor Day, of Celtic and French Canadian music and dance.

“Chandler is the lighthouse,” says Joshua Stumpff, the high school music teacher. “Randolph is a fantastic community. It is very much a farming community, but it also is very rich in culture.”

The high school is too small to have an orchestra (there’s no football team, either), but it does have a lot of musical activity. A music education program led by Sue Ellen Colgan-Borrer, a teacher from Bedford, NY, is an outgrowth of the chamber music festival. In March 2011 Colgan-Borrer put together a program of music suppressed by the Nazis. Not your ordinary high school concert.

“Over the years, the festival has just gotten better and better,” Stumpff says.

Which, coincidentally, is what critic Lowe said in a review last summer. “Despite being one of the best-kept secrets around, the Central Vermont Chamber Music Festival gets better and better,” he wrote. “If only more people could find Randolph.”

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## A 20th-Anniversary Commission—and Other Festivities

The Central Vermont Chamber Festival’s 20th-anniversary season is themed, appropriately, All About Community. The highlight of the season is to be the world premiere of a festival-commissioned work for quartet and percussion by Randolph native Nico Muhly on August 25. That evening’s program will also feature Janáček’s Quartet No. 2 (“Intimate Letters”) and the Brahms Sextet No. 2 in G.

The festival’s by-now-traditional spring performances are set for March 25–26, at the Three Stallion Inn, the Randolph Union High School, and the Wellspring School.

The summer season proper is to begin August 12 with a gala fundraiser, followed on August 16 by an open rehearsal. Vermont Public Radio will present a live broadcast on August 17, followed on August 18 with a program at Chandler Music Hall featuring the Britten Oboe Quartet, the Francaix String Trio and Saint-Saëns Piano Quartet. The following day, August 19, begins with “Breakfast with Bach,” a performance of Bach’s Cantata No. 36 (*Schwingt freudig euch empor*, “Soar Upward, Joyfully”) in Bethany Church, with the Sounding Joy Singers and additional artists from the Vermont Youth Orchestra, Jeffrey Domoto conducting. In the afternoon is a repeat of Saturday night’s program in Woodstock.

The following week begins with an open rehearsal on August 23, continues August 24 with a children’s concert featuring the Lark Quartet and percussionist Yousif Sheronick, and concludes August 25 with the Francaix and Brahms works—and the Muhly premiere.

—P. W. G.

