

# Chautauqua

## Clavier's Annual Camp Profile

by Margaret M. Barela

The seven-week summer program of the Chautauqua Institution often bewilders young piano students new to the program because it offers so much more than just improving piano playing. Activities at Chautauqua include performances, classes, art exhibits, and lectures by national and international figures. Guest speakers initiate discussions on a variety of topics from public issues and international relations, to the arts, literature, and science. The unifying theme shaping the events last year was ethics.

"Chautauqua prepares some people for life. For others, life prepares them for Chautauqua," says Marty Merkely, vice president and director of programs. The experience can feel intense yet timeless as students take whatever they wish from the program. Wise piano students use it to hone their skills and rethink the place of music and piano in their lives.

Located in New York state near Buffalo, the community of Chautauqua has a population of about 500 for nine months of the year that balloons to 7,500 people in residence at anyone time in the summer. In addition about 175,000 visitors of all ages pass through the gates of the institute each year to participate in or observe the 1,000 performances of opera, theater, orchestra, and dance concerts as well as chamber music and solo recitals.

The original idea for the institute dates to 1874, when Lewis Miller and John Heyl Vincent founded the first Chautauqua program as an experiment for educators to study offerings centered around a balance of the arts, religion, science, and recreation. The piano program was established in 1889 by William H. Sherwood. It currently admits 25-30 advanced piano students by audition, ages 16 and older.

Pianist Rebecca Penneys, a longtime piano faculty member of the Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester, became director of the



*Students at Chautauqua have any number of opportunities to perform solo and concerto repertoire.*

Chautauqua piano program 20 years ago, after contributing to its chamber music program with the New Arts Trio for seven years. Her goal is to help students become self-sufficient, problem-solving pianists and musicians, and to develop a set of skills for ongoing learning at the keyboard. To do this she assembled a piano faculty of Joel Schoenhals, Nicola Melville, Steven Laitz, and John Milbauer, all performing pianists on U.S. college faculties, and behavioral optometrist Ray Gottlieb, who assists in a program that teaches students lifelong skills in how to learn.

Chautauqua attracts applicants from all over the world, including students who often return several years in a row. Although the brochure recommends applicants be at least 16 years old, the staff makes exceptions for

younger pianists who have outstanding abilities. Older students reside in dormitories, while the young ones stay with host families.

Over the summer students study with Penneys as well as the other faculty and visiting artists. They work on solo repertoire, piano duets, chamber music, and accompanying in a dizzying schedule of performances.

At the end of the term all the students participate in an international competition. Three guest judges preside over three rounds of playing that take place over three days. Winners receive monetary awards as well as performances at Chautauqua the following year.

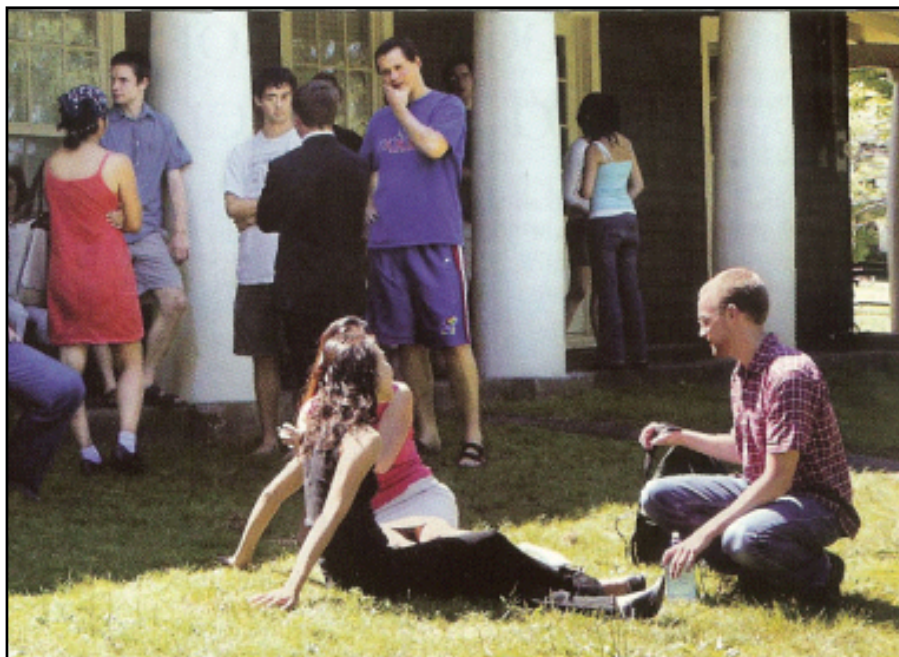
*Margaret M. Barela regularly reviews C.O.s and books for American Record Guide. She was a winner of the 1980 A.S.C.A.P.-Oeems Taylor Award.*

The competition is unlike any other international competition because of extent to which its coordinators shepherd contestants through the process. It becomes an extended lesson how to prepare psychologically for performances and how to thrive in a competition environment.

Because competitive playing can be strikingly different from artistic playing, Penneys designed a set of requirements for the competition that focus on developing students' musicianship and artistry. In 2005 the first phase of the competition required both a virtuosic piece and a lyrical piece. It was striking to hear the 22 contestants excel in technically difficult works but stumble in search of a lyrical sound - and vice versa. Twelve students advanced to the second round, playing 20 minutes of music in three musical styles. The third round was a 35-minute recital by the six finalists. Performers could not duplicate the repertoire from round to round.

Last August in a public presentation addressing piano sound, Penneys spoke about a defining experience she had playing an early fortepiano. It taught her about the sound of instruments that 19th-century composers wrote for and about sound in general. She described how fine pianos can teach people to listen and how relaxing the hands helps pianists hear and feel the vibrating piano strings. Fortepianos could not sustain the long held pedals in the slow movements of Beethoven's "Waldstein" Sonata and his Fourth Piano concerto the way modern pianos do. Penneys demonstrated how to gently flutter the sustaining pedal to duplicate the timing of decay in long pedals on a fortepiano.

Students in the summer program learn how different approaches to practice can help them to reach their musical goals. Pianists on the staff are willing to experiment, grow, and change their approach in front of the students and public. It takes flexibility to continue to experiment with interpretations and not play the same way forever. Nicola Melville says, "Most people find a voice and they are done; that is it. Here, the approach is more personal, yet it is traditional." Joel Schoenhals agrees. "It is not about the piece, but about the people and how they relate to life," he says. "Here, students have the opportunity to transform their playing, expressing who they are as musicians."



*Sherwood Studio, above and center, is at the heart of piano activity at Chautauqua. Rebecca Penneys, bottom, a professor at Eastman, became director of the piano program over 20 years ago.*