On the Marlboro/Aspen/Bowdoin/Taos festival axis, performance is combined with the training of gifted conservatory students. But many an entrepreneurial ensemble musician has found summer happiness by tapping into the surprisingly large market of adult amateurs who are devoted to chamber music.

Bassoonist and composer John Steinmetz belongs to a long line of professional musicians who recognize that the passion and musicianship of non-professionals has long played an important role in keeping chamber music alive.

"We have the Brahms string quartets today because amateur musicians kept buying them from publishers," says Steinmetz, principal bassoonist of the Los Angeles Opera and a vice president of the Chamber Music America board of directors. "We think that the late Beethoven and Mozart quartets survived because professional groups kept performing them, but that's only the tip of the iceberg. The bulk of the preservation work of keeping that music alive in our ears and in our hearts was done by people who weren't getting paid to play it."

Steinmetz knows many such preservationists firsthand through his experiences coaching at Bennington (a.k.a. the Chamber Music Conference and Composers' Forum of the East). Held at Bennington College in Vermont, it is one of the most prominent and longest running amateur chamber music programs in the country.

Steinmetz speaks admiringly of the non-professionals who flock to Bennington each summer. "By the time the participants arrive, they've not only practiced their parts but they've listened to recordings and understand how their parts fit in with other parts, so it's really satisfying coaching them," he explains.
He doesn't just find fulfillment in teaching his amateur students—he gains musical insight from hearing them play, too. "Because there's an adult sensibility, and the repertoire deals with very deep things sometimes, I learn a lot about the meaning of the music," Steinmetz says. The experience helps him "reconnect with the roots of the tradition—that much of this music was written largely to please the people who play it."

Steinmetz also relishes the opportunities to play at Bennington. "It's really exciting to perform for an audience of amateur players because they love music so much. They understand what it takes to play music, so they really appreciate a good performance. The excitement around the performance is just thrilling."

Bennington is one of hundreds of professionally run programs worldwide that offer amateur musicians opportunities to learn, play, and otherwise immerse themselves in chamber music. Along with these programs come many opportunities for professionals to coach and perform. Music For The Love of It, a newsletter and website (www.musicfortheloveofit.com) published by Edgar Rust, offers an annual workshop guide to 433 programs worldwide, 295 of which are in the United States, accommodating amateur players of all levels. (In addition, Chamber Music America members will soon have access to an online database in which they can search for opportunities to work as coaches for amateur ensembles in their locality.)

"I think these events, and the people involved in them, are the fabric of the classical music world," says Shem Guibbory, director of Bennington and a violinist in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. "This is a not sufficiently recognized pillar of support for the professional chamber music field. Not just in the sense of economics, but in terms of energy, activity, and belief."

During the four weekly sessions held at Bennington each summer, the activity begins at around 7:00 a.m. and continues until one or two in the morning. In addition to practicing, receiving coaching, and giving performances, participants may choose to swim, snooze, or savor the Vermont scenery, but mostly they stay immersed in chamber music. While Bennington is open to musicians at all levels, many participants are highly skilled; and although they do not perform, they are often employed in some sector of the music industry.

"We're all almost a bit crazy about it," says Fan Tao, a Bennington violinist for the past 19 summers. For one week a year, Tao is a performer at Bennington (where he also acts as the program's treasurer); during the rest of the year, he is director of research and development at J. D'Addario and Company, the leading string and instrument accessory manufacturing company.

Tao views Bennington as a place where the love of chamber music is a unifying force. (He even met his wife there.) "We see the music world as really a broad continuum rather than just distinct groups of professionals and amateurs. There are people who straddle in between," he explains. Yet there are some distinctions.

Guibbory says that the main distinction may be how economically invested the professionals and amateurs might be in the music business. "For the professional musician who's sluging it out in the trenches trying to earn a living in our society, the validation and inspiration [of Bennington] is profound," Guibbory notes.

Steinmetz adds that having careers outside of music may actually benefit musicians like Tao. "By doing something for a living other than music, they free themselves of the baggage professional musicians have. Other peoples' judgments don't weigh heavily on their income and professional identity, and they don't get their artistic side confused with their business side."

Gabriela Frank, a composer-in-residence at Bennington in 2004 (she plans to return in 2005), is rather admiring of the amateurs, whom she likens to superheroes with dual lives. "They'd have their musician persona, their citizen outfit, and then rip open the costume and they're a professional philosopher or a Desert Storm war hero. And us so-called faculty musicians joked that we were just one thing: a composer and a composer, or a pianist and a pianist."

Frank, who premiered one of her Latin American folkloric string quartets at last summer's Bennington conference, adds that the atmosphere there is egalitarian. "There was no compromise that had to be made in order to design to work with amateur musicians," says Frank. Bennington's Guibbory concurs that the sharp line between amateur and professional is rarely drawn: "We are an extended community of musicians," he says. "The activities and interrelationships between participants and between faculty, and even between the two groups, continue throughout the year."

In fact, this past December, Guibbory and fellow Bennington faculty recorded an album to commemorate the program's 60th anniversary. Ceiling of Heaven (Albany) includes several works written by Bennington composers-in-residence Donald Crockett and Allen Shawn and commissioned by Bennington
participants. The Wellesley Composer’s Conference is another amateur program whose participants are known to independently commission works from composers-in-residence. It originated as part of Bennington, then morphed into its own program.

Wellesley and Bennington exemplify some of the largest and most long-lived programs designed for amateurs in particular. But several pre-professional festivals also run programs for nonprofessionals. The renowned Kneisel Hall in Blue Hill, Maine, has been nurturing top ensemble players since 1915. Its amateur week began in 1979, when director George Sopkin of the Fine Arts Quartet decided to bring Kneisel Hall students together with musicians in the community. Since then, ten of Kneisel’s fifty pre-professional students stay on at Blue Hill after their own intensive seven-week program to play alongside amateurs—or “adults” as they prefer to be called—in groups formally coached by professional faculty.

“The interest in chamber music has risen, and that has sparked the adult programs,” Sopkin says. “People discover that the repertoire available in chamber music is extraordinary. I mean, you have all the Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms. And then you have all the contemporary composers who find that they get more performances with chamber music than with an orchestra because of the cost of putting on a concert.”

Ellen Werner, Kneisel Hall’s executive director, says that the collaboration between students and amateur “adults” is often mutually beneficial—and stimulating to the chamber music field at large. “Our adults follow our students’ careers. They write to the kids after the summers, come to their recitals and invite all the people they know,” she says.

Gabriela Frank enjoyed such an experience when a Bennington contingent, of at least ten participants, showed up at her Carnegie Hall performance in the John Harbison/Dawn Upshaw Workshop for Composers and Singers in October 2004. “I saw several of them sitting together and they did a little mini-wave, and I was so excited to see them there. I had mentioned this concert once in August, and they showed up. I mentioned it once,” she laughs.

In addition to the kinds of workshops at programs held on college campuses and pre-professional institutions like Kneisel Hall, community presenters and summer schools for pre-college musicians offer amateur programs. One is the Kinhaven Music School in Vermont, which holds a chamber music week and a piano workshop focusing on four-hand repertoire. In the Midwest, Chamber Music at the Barn (a presenter in Prairie Pines, Kansas) and the Madeline Island Music Camp offer adult sessions as well. Such programs often reach out to parents, alumni, and community members.

Many large chamber music festivals also host workshops, capitalizing on the likelihood that their audience members include musicians who are eager to learn and play chamber music themselves. The Apple Hill Summer Chamber Music Festival in New Hampshire, which combines professional concerts with workshops for more than 275 participants, draws a mix of ages, so a 75-year-old violinist could easily find himself playing a Haydn trio alongside a 40-year-old pianist and a 13-year-old cellist.

Recognizing the burgeoning amateur market, many professional musicians create programs of their own. New York City-based pianist Lily Friedman co-founded one, Summer Trios, with a business partner/piano student in 1990. Located rural Pennsylvania, it offers several week-long sessions at different playing levels. In the regular program, participants play alongside fellow amateurs while being coached by professionals; in the “premium” program, they play with professional musicians in chamber groups; and in the concerto program, they essentially hire a professional orchestra to accompany them. Each level involves a different participation fee.

Friedman offers a number of explanations for the flourishing interest in amateur workshops: “People are living longer, and I think it’s more acceptable to have a goal later in life, and maybe people are starting to think that life is not over at 50 or 60. I also think that it’s because the world is in such a mess, so the more you can be involved in something like this where you can at least strive to make something beautiful, it helps.”

Compared with some larger conferences such as Bennington, which can have up to 90 participants in one session, The Raphael Trio’s 35-participant workshop, also held in Vermont, is an intimate experience. Raphael cellist Susan Salm says that participating in her group’s weeklong chamber music workshop can fill a very personal void particularly for the older participants, some of whom have attended since it began 20 years ago.

In the Manhattan String Quartet’s longstanding summer program, Kent Music, all the participants in pre-formed quartets—amateur, professional, and semiprofessional—focus on one piece. But the Kent program also offers cultural expeditions in which participants travel to a European city together. Every morning they are coached in a specific work of one composer; in the afternoons they collectively explore the composer’s city and culture. This year’s expedition, offered in January and February,
took place in Leipzig, Germany; it focused on Mendelssohn's Opus 80 String Quartet.

Anyone interested in launching a workshop should know about Amateur Chamber Music Players, Inc. (ACMP), a 5,000-member organization based in New York that publishes an international amateur directory. ACMP has a foundation solely dedicated to helping entrepreneurial musicians launch amateur programs across the country. David Yang, a Philadelphia-area violist, started the Main Line Chamber Music Seminar with the foundation's support. The seminar now offers popular, day-long workshops twice a year. Also supported by ACMP, the Westwind Brass Quintet, a California group, has held weekend brass chamber music workshops for several years.

For many chamber music enthusiasts, the term "workshop" may actually be inadequate to describe what can be a profoundly life-altering experience.

Just ask the Raphael Trio's Susan Salim: "I have seen people who lost a husband or wife and this was the thing that got them back on their feet. One man was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and he made it for two more summers. It was one of the things that kept him alive."

Amateur passion for workshops may well be boundless. One frequent participant, pianist Arlene Hajinlian, who works as an education specialist for a biopharmaceutical corporation, recently moved into a Fort Lee, New Jersey, home after making sure it was large enough to host chamber music parties. On her guest list are the many amateur musicians she has met since she began attending workshops throughout the Northeast five years ago. She has even organized a workshop of her own, reserving all the beds at an inn and inviting 18 friends for a weekend-long chamber music extravaganza.

Then there's Bernard Gondos, M.D., a retired surgeon and pathologist in Santa Barbara California. He is also an amateur violinist and composer, who in one year had the luxury of attending ten chamber music workshops in a row. His tour began in May at a workshop coached by the Arpeggione Quartet in Paris. In June he went to the Apple Hill festival in New Hampshire, conveniently located near his next stop, the Raphael Trio's workshop in Adirondack, Vermont. July found him in Albuquerque for Princeton Play Week West, which he had to leave immediately in order to register at the San Diego Chamber Music Workshop. In August he flew to England for two different workshops, then returned home to Santa Barbara where he organized his own workshop. He finished off the year at Musical Passages in Spain.

While the stories of Gondos and Hajinlian may be unusually extravagant examples, their joy and commitment are readily found among other amateur players, making them an essential part of the chamber music environment.

"People may find that music fills a yearning that no number of successful surgeries or winning legal cases can fill," says Bennington's John Steinmetz. "That's the reason we have music in the first place, to work with energies and aspects of ourselves that we can't talk about any other way, to go places where words and numbers just won't go."

Recognizing and encouraging the amateur enthusiasts can only enrich the chamber music environment as a whole. "Those people understand the music in a more physical, emotional, and deeper way than others, and when you have audiences with fewer practitioners in them, the audiences may wither," Steinmetz notes.

Steinmetz invokes the language of environmentalists to explain this delicate balance between the professionals and nonprofessionals who gather to perform and enjoy chamber music in workshops and performance venues. "Professional musicians often think that the chamber music ecosystem consists only of paying audiences, presenters, and composers. But the ecosystem really depends on the health of the amateur scene," he says.

"We need to make sure that people keep playing the repertoire—and that people who come to the concerts know from experience what it means to interact in a chamber ensemble," he says. "That is crucial to the ongoing health of the chamber music field."

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