

The Perlman's Paradise

Toby and Itzhak Perlman provide young musicians a place to learn and grow

“What do you think is the challenge of this movement?”

The great violinist and conductor Itzhak Perlman has just listened to students play the first movement of Fauré's Piano Quartet in G minor. “Pacing,” answers the pianist who, along with the others, had only a week to learn this music. “Yes, pacing has the most potential problems — and sometimes it was too tied to dynamics.” He asks them to start again, “And this time, make it an earthquake,” he says. “Seven points on the Richter Scale.”

by Margaret Shakespeare

PERLMAN MUSIC PROGRAM

On a balmy evening an audience of two hundred or so has gathered in a tent to observe a master class of the Perlman Music Program (PMP) on Shelter Island, a fashionable weekend-home destination between the North and South Forks on the East End of New York's Long Island. Each year, PMP holds a six-week Summer Music Camp for 35 gifted string players, ages 12-18, followed by a Chamber Music Workshop for 50 18-30 year-olds. Itzhak Perlman, who will appear with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra on Nov. 4, 6 and 7, serves as lead PMP teacher for studio lessons and masterclasses, plays chamber music alongside PMP students and alumni, and conducts the PMP String Orchestra.

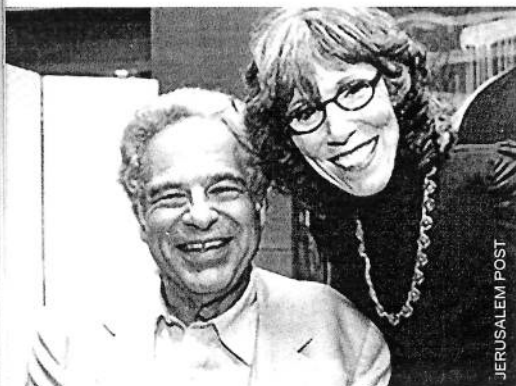
But it was another Perlman who, with a dream and the vision to realize it, created PMP and guides the day-to-day operation — Toby Perlman, Itzhak

Perlman's wife. The Perlmans met as violin students at The Juilliard School, married and raised five children. His career, of course, became one of the most legendary of our time. Now, she has developed one of the fastest-rising training programs for elite young talent, persuading top-tier teaching faculty, including Mr. P., as everyone on campus calls him, to join in. She says emphatically that he had to be talked into it. “He didn't want to do it at first. But this is the best thing that ever happened to him,” she says. “He works harder here than at any time of the year. He is constantly challenged. Nothing is more challenging than a 13-year-old rolling their eyes at you. They are not afraid of him!”

Toby Perlman hesitates to actually describe PMP as her life's dream. “That

Continued on page 42





Itzhak and Toby Perlman

Continued from page 20

sounds so cliché and mundane. But it is sort of a dream that came out of real life," she says. "I used to sit in the cafeteria at Juilliard and say to my girl friends, 'You know, if *I* were running this place...' Then, later, I looked at summer music programs for my own kids. But on the drive back I would think 'If *I* were running it...'

Well, now she is running it. She thinks back two decades. "I went to a meeting in East Hampton about starting a Big Time Music Festival," she frowns and explains. "We had left Aspen [Music Festival] because it had gotten so big. Then someone at the meeting said we should do what other festivals do — have a school." She perks up, "I said, 'A School?! I'll do that.' It wasn't like I had [consciously made a plan]. But it had been sitting there in the prefrontal cortex of my brain, waiting to come out of my mouth."

Her plan, conscious or not, revolves around developing the musician *and* the

"We get a shared musical experience more delicious than solo"

person, nurturing and building confidence, while letting the kids enjoy ordinary-kid things. Some of the biggest names in show business and philanthropy (Geffen, Spielberg, Lauder) bought and donated the Shelter Island campus — a collection of white clapboard buildings tucked on a wooded hillside — a decade ago, and other supporters (Billy Joel, Alec Baldwin, Alan Alda) have come on board since then. PMP bases admission solely on talent and works with small numbers. "The number of kids is set in stone. This program is so small, so elitist, that we have the opportunity to be helpful to every single one. I expect a lot in return — I expect them to become stellar citizens of the world," she says. "I take the music part for granted. It's always been the center of my life, and it's our common denominator. Of course, I am happy when they get management or a great booking. But emotional growth, overcoming shyness, finding a peer group and no longer being a freak — that's the real reward."

The kids get one-on-one private lessons, chamber music coaching and lots of time



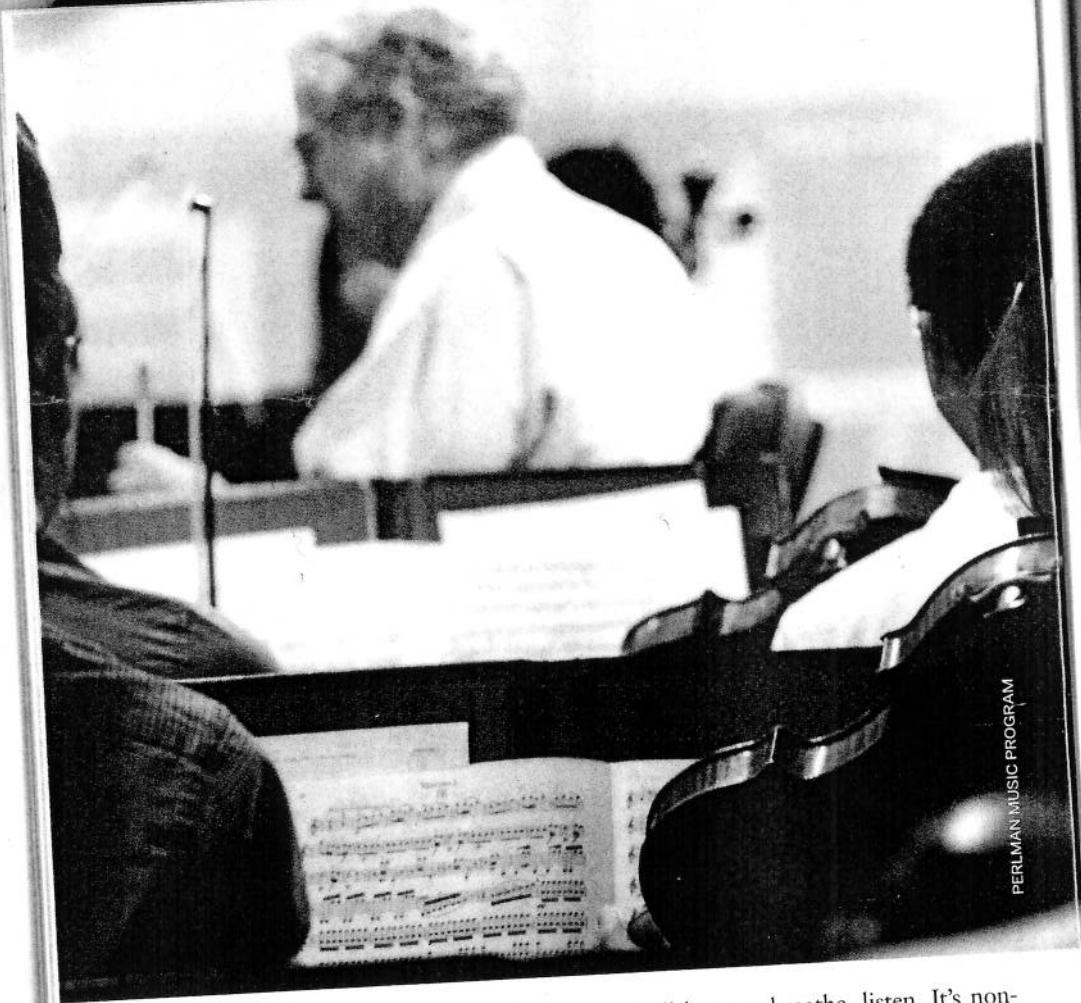
PERLMAN MUSIC PROGRAM

and space to practice. They also get free time to dabble in the art room, paddle a kayak in the bay or soak up some sun on the beach, and take shopping trips to an outlet mall. Everybody does chores — from setting up the stage for performances to washing dishes in the kitchen. "I watch them helping each other, which is what I want to see," Toby Perlman says with a sigh of great satisfaction, "and, as a side line, they can play pretty well, too." While the training to play pretty well is pretty intense, the pressure here is not. She is adamant that school be "the world of the child." Without any intruder, which too often (she explains with a sigh of dissatisfaction) is the parent. PMP dean, Adam Meyer, says of the noncompetitive atmosphere, "We don't put student names in programs. We don't want them to be reviewed or singled out."

Audiences, though, with sand still in their flip-flops, can listen along at evenings of Works in Progress, when students perform music they are learning. In fact, at a Music Camp performance, only lilting birdsong challenges the warm sonorities of a

Beethoven cello sonata; crickets try outdo the Ravel F Major String Quartet, resting when the next group tunes up to play Prokofiev. One can hear the individual styles and personalities — muscular, fat, sweet, singing — of these violinists, violists, cellists and pianists starting to emerge and come alive. Clearly they already have keen, sensitive listening skills.

Both Perlman and Perlman learned the value of supportive teaching from the late Dorothy DeLay, their much-loved Juilliard mentor, and PMP reflects her positive ideals. Itzhak Perlman, who is happy when students sidle up to him at dinner or interrupt chats about New York sports teams with questions about music, says of the learning process: "In practicing, the one who accomplishes the most is the one who is well-organized. Being able to practice is a skill that has to be taught. Doing X hours a day usually doesn't work. I tell [students] to talk about what's wrong to themselves. Usually, when you ask them what the problems are, they know. I like to involve the kids in the process. Better for the kid to come up with the solution; then he owns it."



Although he's taught at places like Brooklyn College and Juilliard, his wife observes, "his involvement here is different." (An oenophile, his involvement extends to the annual PMP fine wine auction fundraiser.) Indeed, everyone's involvement here seems to be different. Students, faculty and staff take all meals together, on a big porch overlooking the water. And every day at 5 p.m. all gather for choral singing with conductor Patrick Romano. "We get a shared musical experience more delicious than asolo," says Toby Perlman.

"We all have to breathe, listen. It's non-competitive music-making."

Mr. P., working with the Fauré quartet players, says: "Everything here is an experiment. If you hate my idea, tell me. And if it's not good, I'll be the first to tell you, since it's my idea. Take a chance." They do. He applauds. "Beautiful playing. Bravo." ■

Margaret Shakespeare, a writer and musicologist, lives in New York City and on the North Fork of Long Island.