

For a number of years now, my family, friends and I have made a short ferry-ride and drive to the Crescent Beach area of Shelter Island, enjoyed a leisurely picnic dinner while looking out at the water in the magical light of a late summer evening, and then enjoyed superb music in a very large well-lit tent with a stage, and walls that can be lowered against a summer rain or winds that can become too cool as night's darkness descends. The venue for the *free-admission* concerts is the Perlman Summer Music Program. And last summer, for the first time, the Perlman School came to Sag Harbor and gave a concert at Whalers Church, and will do so again in August. Now don't let the words "school" and "students" put you off, for these students, who range in age from eleven to seventeen, come from all over the U.S. and the world, and are some of the finest musicians of any ages you'll hear anywhere. In fact, as is often said by people in the audience, if you close your eyes at one of their concerts, you can swear you are in Philharmonic Hall at Lincoln Center. There are only thirty-eight students, selected from a very large number of applicants, and it would not be an exaggeration to describe some of them as prodigies, and all of them as excellent.

Recently I met with the summer school's director, Toby Perlman, in the East Hampton home she shares with her husband, Itzhak Perlman, who is, of course, one of the greatest musicians of our time, and world-renowned as the preeminent violin virtuoso. And he is also a member of the excellent faculty at the music camp, teaching students of the violin, and frequently playing in the summer concerts. (All the students play one of the bowed string instruments -- violin, viola, cello and double bass. At concerts, as needed, they are accompanied by pianists.)

The mission of the summer school camp, Toby Perlman explained to me, "is to provide a safe environment for highly gifted string players from around the world. By 'a safe environment,' I mean that all humans respond to negativity in much the same way -- the person shuts down. At the school, we eliminate competition immediately. The better a student feels, the faster and better he or she will learn. ... We're interested in *interesting* musicians, not robots. How do you achieve that? The way you get it -- and we're talking about very gifted kids -- is by saying, 'What made you think of playing the phrase that way?' Suppose the student is playing Mozart like Brahms. We say, 'Tell me about that -- how did you get to that?' The student usually answers, 'I feel it that way.' 'Well great,' we say, 'tell me more!'" Mrs. Perlman told me her husband teaches one morning per week, and "the rules of his class are, 'When you make a comment, you're not allowed to say anything negative. Let's talk about what was positive, and perhaps make some suggestions.' Once the students feel safe, they have a feeling of trust. And once you have that, the student will take a chance on playing in a way he's never done before."

BY RICHARD GAMBINO

## Sublime Music On Soft Summer Nights

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To audition for the summer school, prospective students must submit a video recording of themselves playing. The videos are viewed by faculty members, e.g., Mr. and Mrs. Perlman watch the violinists who audition. In addition to the students' sounds, they also pay attention to "body language" to see if there are any problems, e.g., tenseness or nervousness beyond what is usual in an audition, to see if there is anything wrong with the "very important neurological connection between the hands and the brain."

"Also," Mrs. Perlman added, "we learn a lot about the students' teachers and how the students have been taught." There are many applicants each year, but few are accepted. Those who are come back year after year, and openings occur only when someone turns eighteen. This year, there were only five openings, but seven students were accepted -- five cellists and two violinists. "The violinists were so good," Mrs. Perlman explained, "that my husband could not exclude them."

In addition to working with their instruments, all the students and all nine faculty members sing each day as a chorus -- considered an important part of everyone's musical development. At one concert last summer Mr. Perlman

and a small group of students and faculty sang an a cappella version of a 1950s rhythm and blues song by the Dell-Vikings, "Come Go With Me," with Mr. Perlman singing the "doo-wop" bass part. It brought down the house.

Each year, the students are assigned "homework" to do before arriving at the camp. Last year, it was to watch a recording of the opera, *Otello*, by Giuseppe Verdi, and to read Shakespeare's *Othello*. The year before, it was to watch a recording of Prokofiev's ballet, *Romeo and Juliet*, and read the play by Shakespeare. Then, at the school, they watched additional performances of the musical works and discussed them. This year, the homework assignment involves Schumann-Schubert *lieder*: read the poems, then listen to songs, then play them as chamber music.

This is the Perlman school's fourteenth summer season, the last eight on Shelter Island, using a site and buildings that Mrs. Perlman says "are perfect for us." It also overlooks the water, allowing the people at the camp to swim -- watched over by the camp's own lifeguard. But the buildings date back decades to when they constituted a girls camp, and are old and expensive to maintain. In fact, the school's annual budget is formidable, and its board and other volunteers work year-round at raising funds. It costs \$35,000 per student per year to run the school. Tuition is \$5,500, but three-quarters of the young people are on full or partial scholarships. The scholarships add up to \$109,950, so the school's net tuition income is only \$99,050. The rest of the budget depends on donations, and on volunteers who work hard to raise money.

Two of the volunteers are responsible for bringing the entire school, *all* the faculty and *all* the students to play at Old Whalers Church last summer and this coming August. They are board member Morgan Stark and his wife, Sidney, long-time residents of North Haven -- in fact, Mr. Stark spent his boyhood summers in North Haven. They told me that they chose Sag Harbor because of the village's historic relationships to the arts, and Old Whalers Church because of its superb acoustics. Last year's concert played to a full-capacity audience, and tickets for this season's concert, on August 16 at 7 pm, will no doubt go fast.

Admission to all the Friday and Saturday concerts on Shelter Island, as said, is free of charge. And the public, including children, is also invited to watch rehearsals during the week, come and go as you please, also free of charge. Tickets for the Aug. 16 concert at Whalers Church cost \$25 and \$75, the latter price for the best seats in the house, and go on sale on June 16. The free performances on Shelter Island begin on June 20.

Information regarding all events can be obtained at [www.perlmanmusicprogram.org](http://www.perlmanmusicprogram.org), and at 212/877-5045.

**RICHARD GAMBINO** believes that Shakespeare was right when he wrote, "The man that hath no music in him ... The motions of his spirit are dull as night."