

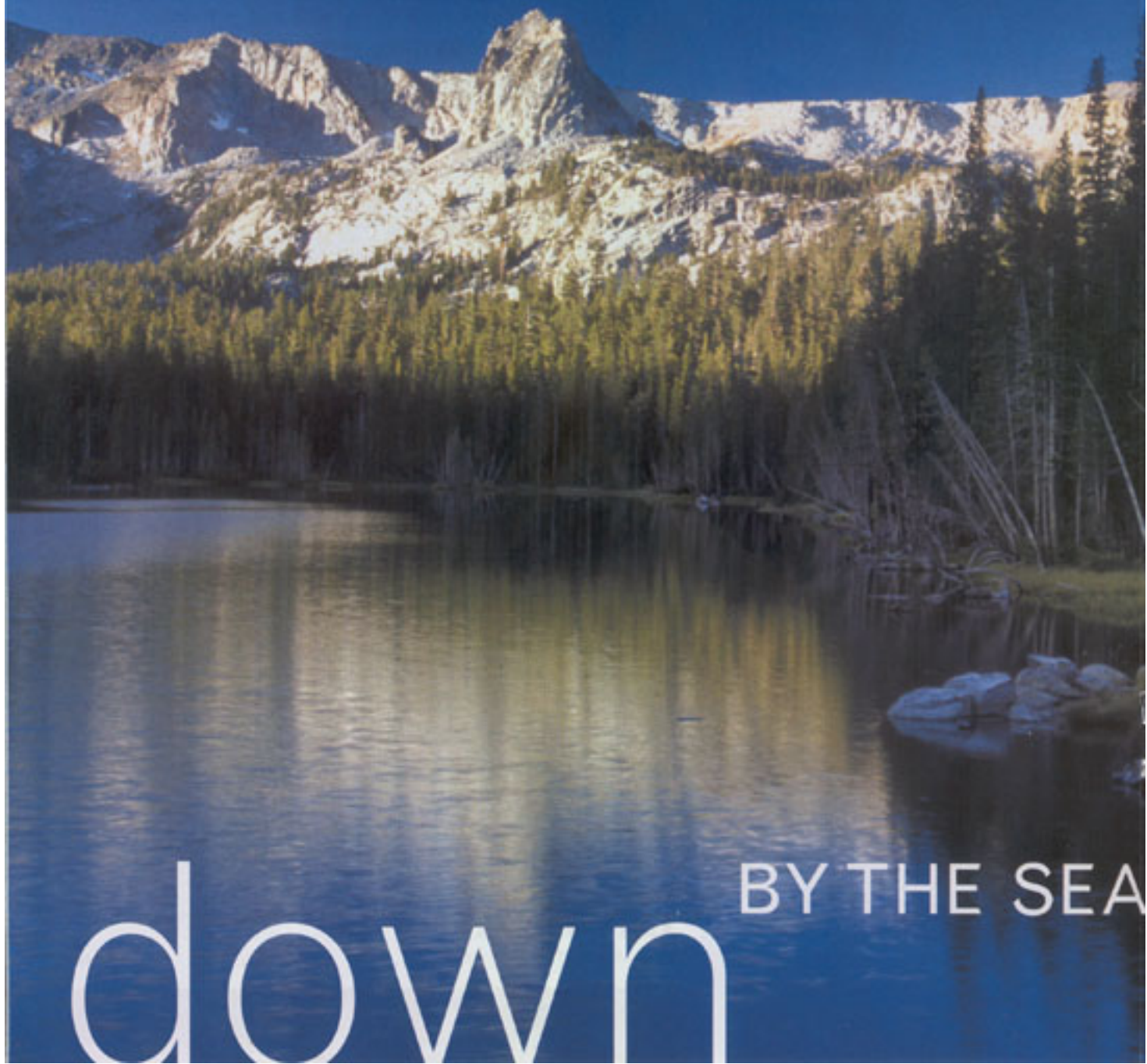
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IN THE MOUNTAINS

IN VERY DIFFERENT WAYS—AND AT OPPOSITE ENDS OF THE COUNTRY—THE FELICI TRIO AND THE DAPONTE STRING QUARTET HAVE WORKED TO BUILD REWARDING CAREERS FROM A SMALL-TOWN BASE. BY EVA JACOB

down

BY THE SEA



The intimacy of a small community feels right for chamber music," says Rebecca Hang, violinist of the Felici Piano Trio, in residence since 1998 in Mammoth Lakes, California. Hang and her husband, cellist Brian Schuldt, and their two children, Sophia (6) and Ari (4), have become wholehearted members of this community of 7,500, a resort town high in eastern Sierras. Pianist Pauline Zamora was equally involved for four years; but in late spring, an unexpected opportunity arose to head up a chamber music program in her native Chile, and she made the difficult decision to return there. Wen-Ting Huang has come on board to replace her—stepping quickly into the many roles the Felicis play in the region as performers, teachers, coaches, and presenters.

The Felicis work hard in a challenging environment—many miles separate the towns they serve, and they get a lot of snow (an exceptional fifty feet last winter)—but Hang and Schuldt report that they can't imagine a better situation. "We can have a family here and a rewarding professional life," says Hang.

Three thousand miles away, in Damariscotta, Maine, members of the DaPonte String Quartet, in residence since 1995, say much the same thing. "We have a real music career without the urban drawbacks," violist Mark Preston remarks. "You're respected and appreciated in the community for what you contribute as a musician," adds violinist Ferdinand Liva.

Like the Felicis, the DaPontes originally came to their jobs through an NEA-funded Chamber Music America residency program that focused on rural areas. Host communities provided rent-free living and rehearsal space, plus one-third of the musicians' stipends. Ensembles lived in these communities for a full school year, gaining performance and teaching experience, while building repertoire and meeting unexpected challenges. (In the years since, the CMA program has expanded from the original rural residency program into the Residency Partnership Program, which funds both short-term and multiyear residencies—not only in rural environments, but in underserved urban and suburban locales as well.)

Many of the musicians involved undoubtedly thought of their residencies as stepping stones to someplace else, preferably more populous and less isolated. But a few enterprising ensembles—such as the Felicis and the DaPontes—developed ongoing support, enabling them to settle where they started out. What has made these two residencies—a continent apart—sustainable? Curious to learn more, I spent a week with the Felicis last April (when pianist Zamora was finishing out her last season) and a long weekend with the DaPontes in May.

Formed in 1994, the Felici Piano Trio has performed more than 300 concerts in Europe, South America and the U.S. Its members—graduates of the University of the Indiana School of Music in Bloomington—have won prizes at the Chataqua, Yellow Springs, and Osaka competitions. After three years in Mammoth Lakes, during which they gave concerts and created educational programs ranging from school events to adult education seminars, the trio decided to settle in the town permanently. They were funded in part by NEA/Chamber Music America for a fourth year in 2001. But in the economic downturn of 2003, the local Mono County Arts

Council and the California Arts Council could no longer provide support, so the Felici Piano Trio worked with Mammoth community leaders to form its own not-for-profit support organization, Chamber Music Unbound (CMU).

I spent the week in Mammoth Lakes visiting with board members, talking to parents and teachers, and seeing the Felicis rehearse, perform, and teach. I also observed a session of Chamber Music Mayhem, the trio's monthly instrumental workshop for kids 7 to 17. The ensemble's activities, I learned, are not limited to Mammoth Lakes; the group is active all along the eastern Sierra, from Bridgeport



Felici al fresco: Rebecca Hang, Wen-Ting Huang, and Brian Schuldt

(54 mountain miles north of Mammoth) to Ridgecrest (179 miles to the south).

On a Thursday afternoon, during an April snowstorm, I joined the group on a three-hour drive to Ridgecrest (estimated population 26,500). The Felicis had been invited there to address the local Music Teachers Association about training for chamber music, to "adjudicate" students preparing for year-end recitals, and to give the evening concert sponsored by the Ridgecrest Chamber Music Society—recently formed in response to the Felicis' concert presence in the area.

"Training for chamber music starts with the very first lesson," Hang told the music teachers the next morning. "Every meaningful interaction prepares for chamber music." Seated in the downtown Ridgecrest Presbyterian Church, the teachers listened attentively. Outside, it was sunny and felt like spring; in Mammoth, 4,000 feet higher, snow was piled up to the roofline of most houses.

Hang, Schuldt, and Zamora spent the afternoon listening to and advising elementary, middle, and high school students, one by one. That evening, the trio performed Mozart's Trio in G Major (K.496); "Boogie Woogie," from David Baker's *Roots II* for Piano Trio (1992); and Schubert's Piano Trio in B-Flat Major, op. 99, for an audience that filled the United Methodist Church.

The next morning, from 9:00 till noon, adjudications continued. Every ten minutes, Zamora got to hear another earnest young piano student, and each one left with some specific, constructive suggestion. As goodbyes were said, Hang explored the possibility of Ridgecrest/Mammoth field trips and exchanges. "Our kids are so isolated—it would be wonderful for them to meet other music students."

After lunch, we drove back to Mammoth. "Next week we're doing this all over again," said Schuldt, grinning. "This time in Jackson and West Point [in the western foothills of the Sierras, and north of Mammoth]. We'll be checking the weather to see whether this will be a three- or a seven-hour trip, depending on whether the Sonora Pass is open."

"Sometimes we wonder whether we are doing too much," said Hang. "But the teaching helps our own playing. It clarifies our thinking." The trio prepares and performs five distinct programs for its 20-concert winter series. Ten concerts are performed in the residency area, ten more on tours within and beyond California. Each member of the Trio also performs in its three-week-long Mammoth Lakes Music Festival. In recent years, festival guest artists have included cellists Tsuyoshi Tsutsumi and Brant Taylor, violist Atar Arad, oboist Marion Kuszyk, violinists Corey Cerovsek and Nokuthula Ngwenyama, pianist Evelyne Brancart, and composer Paul Moravec.

The Sierra Chamber Ensemble Workshop, for adult amateurs, runs concurrently with the festival, and guest artists join the

"We had the luxury of being able to mature to a whole new level, to develop a group sound that people learned to recognize."



The DaPontes in Brunswick, Maine: Preston, Forbes, Liva, Jordan

Felicis as faculty. Many festival workshop participants also play in the Eastern Sierra Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Brian. And every second year, the group conducts a workshop in Florence, Italy—an opportunity that came about through an Italian visitor to Mammoth who heard one of its concerts.

Winter concerts are held in St. Joseph's, a sturdy wooden church with good acoustics and a parking lot that's reliably cleared of snow. The church holds about 200 people, and the pews are usually packed. According to Hang and Schuldt, people from the cities are beginning to schedule their ski weekends to coincide with Felici concerts. Sunday performances begin shortly after midday Mass, while the church is still warm. "Some people never leave," says Schuldt, "they just move to a better seat."

Father Andy Dachauer also heats the church on days when the trio rehearses there; and at the end of the season, the Felicis make a donation to help pay the costs. It's one of the informal relationships in this small community that sustain their ongoing residency. Other essential partnerships are with the Mammoth Lakes Foundation and Cerro Coso Community College, which provide office, rehearsal, and classroom space.

The community college also provides venues for the Felici's summer festival concerts and its Chamber Music Mayhem program. Mayhem sessions serve about 35 youngsters who have at least three years' experience with their instruments. Mixed-age groups work together: 20 minutes on their own, 20 minutes with coaching, and then another 20 minutes on their own again. A bountiful snack comes next (shopped for and arranged by Peggie Chew, a board member) and a half-hour to socialize. Then everyone is assigned to another group, and the process resumes for a second hour. Winter and spring concerts serve as fundraisers for the program.

I was impressed with the seriousness of the children, the kindness and respect with which they tried to help one another master their group tasks. There was very little fooling around. "Children need to know that you respect them," Rebecca said. "Then they do this for each other. We develop very specific, constructive language: 'How do we fix this?' The idea is to solve problems together." In all, the Felici's music instruction programs reach more than 100 children, in group (\$135 for the school year) and private lessons, the latter with enrollment in the "Certificate of Merit" program of the California Music Teachers Association. The Mammoth and Bishop String Orchestras are an option for ages 5 to 15, as are group piano lessons at Cerro Coso for students 12 to 18. About half of the children participating are on full scholarship.

Gifts, grants and contributions made up about 70 percent of CMU's 2004-05 budget of \$185,000. Earned income—ticket sales, school outreach, chamber music workshops, group lessons and individual lesson tuition combined—provides only about 30 percent of what's needed. On the expense side, fully 73 percent of budget goes to employee salaries—a base of \$30,000 each, augmented by tuition income, according to teaching load—plus health insurance premiums, payroll taxes, and workers' compensation contributions.

Looking to the future, Don Sage, CMU's chairman, speaks about the need for greater stability. Permanent housing will soon be a pressing need. Hang and Schuldt and their children currently live in a rented, multilevel townhouse unit with office and teaching space on the first floor; kitchen/dining and living room/bedroom facilities on the second, and the children's bedroom on the third. Wen-Ting Huang has moved in next door.

"But to have room to live, teach, and rehearse, Brian and Rebecca are really going to need a four-bedroom house," comments Sage. That's why they have put their names into the town lottery for affordable housing, to be built in the next three to four years.

CMU's five-year plan proposes adding a full-time administrative position. This year has the trio members theoretically dedicating 30 hours per week to CMU, with two weeks' paid vacation and standard holidays. Yet the schedule they outlined for me (rehearsals every morning, teaching in the afternoon, practicing and/or writing programs and publicity office work at night) suggests that they often work 16-hour days. They don't complain; they do now have office help for 10 hours a week, and Peggie Chew and a team of local volunteers often provide extra pairs of hands.

Late last spring, just when things appeared to be under control, Paulina Zamora got the offer from the Escuela Moderna de Musica in Santiago. A replacement had to be found immediately. Within days of the Felici's advertising in the College Music Society's

music vacancy list, 34 pianists applied, nearly all with tapes of very high quality. After extensive interviews (What is it that you can uniquely contribute to the Felici's work, apart from your playing skills? Can you imagine yourself living in a small, rather isolated community? Do you like snow? Wildlife?), four finalists came to visit. Wen-Ting Huang, also an IU graduate—and active in Europe, the U.S., and Taiwan as a solo and collaborative artist—seemed perfect for the job.

Her predecessor Zamora also had an international background and, during her years with the trio, had awakened the local Latino community's interest in the ensemble's work (22 percent of Mammoth's residents are of Latin American origin). Zamora now plans to develop some sort of student exchange between Mammoth Lakes and the Escuela Moderna. Asked how the Chilean pianist's departure would affect the Felici's ability to maintain contact with the Latino community, Hang told me that her whole family would be participating in the local elementary school's Spanish/English dual immersion program. "We signed

CMA Regional Workshops DESIGNING COMMUNITY RESIDENCIES

Susan Dadian, program director of Chamber Music America, will lead sessions for performers and presenters on the elements of forging community partnerships and planning successful residency projects.

San Francisco CA

February 13, 10:00 a.m.
ODC DanceCommons
351 Shotwell Street

Los Angeles CA

February 15, 2:00 p.m.
William Andrews Clark Memorial Library
University of California, Los Angeles

Tempe AZ

February 17, 2:00 p.m.
Wells Fargo Arena, Rm 116
Arizona State University

Philadelphia PA

March 8, 2:00 p.m.
Rock Hall
Boyer College of Music, Temple University

Washington DC

March 9, 2:00 p.m.
Whittall Pavilion, Thomas Jefferson Building
Library of Congress

Regional workshops are free to CMA members and \$5.00 for non-members. Seating is limited. To register, or for more information, contact David Ezer (212) 242-2022, ext. 17, or dezer@chamber-music.org.

a contract which stipulates our personal involvement with the program over the next five years. We volunteer an hour a week in the classroom and attend a monthly parent meeting in English/Spanish." She adds that a significant number of Latin American children are already enrolled in the after-school orchestra class; and she hopes that her family's involvement in this dual language program will bring more.

Hang also expresses the wish that someday an intern ensemble or a pioneering music teacher might help CMU by traveling to the smaller schools on a weekly basis, but she concedes that's still a distant dream. "In the meantime," she says, "we know that what we are doing here is really making a difference." Emphasizing that this work is important for its own sake, she adds: "It's not intended to lead to a career someplace else. We are where we want to be." Here, she explains, the trio can continue to grow artistically, and pursue its presenting goals: "We are ambitious," says Hang, "we want to enrich the Eastern Sierra with music at the highest level." Says Schuldt, "Don't worry about us. This is our life, our great adventure."

My visit with the DaPonte String Quartet (DSQ) in May came at a particularly exciting time in the life of the quartet. A few weeks before had seen the ensemble's debut at Carnegie Hall, a premiere performance of David Del Tredici's String Quartet No.1 in A minor, commissioned for them by their supportive board, the Friends of the DaPonte String Quartet (FDSQ).

It was also a moment of transition. That weekend's concerts—Friday in Newcastle, Saturday in Portland, and Sunday in Brunswick—were the last that would be played with violinist Stephane Tran Ngoc. A distinguished soloist and quartet player, he had been with the DSQ for two years but found that the



The DaPontes (with Tran Ngoc) before their debut performance at Carnegie Hall

demands of his solo and teaching career, together with family needs, conflicted with the amount of rehearsal time the quartet requires. Lydia Forbes, the DSQ's recently hired violinist, would arrive June 15 and needed to hit the ground running; the summer concert series (eight concerts in three different venues) was slated to begin July 19.

I attended a Friday night concert in late June. About a hundred people attended this first of three weekend performances (the last of the local 18-concert winter series), in Saint Patrick's Church.

Saint Patrick's is the DaPontes' fourth local venue; they've moved from time to time to accommodate a growing audience. Billed as "A Visit to South America," the concert featured works by Arriaga, Turina, Piazzolla, and Francisco Fleita Polo.

The next morning, I met with the three founding members—Ferdinand Liva, violin; Mark Preston, viola; and Myles Jordan, cello—over coffee in Liva's kitchen in nearby Topsham. Liva was holding Alex, his very active toddler son, so that his wife, composer Gia Comolli, could make a phone call in peace. "We always want to have a five- or six-day-a-week rehearsal schedule, from 9:00 to 12:00 absolutely every morning," Liva said. That rehearsal time is the core of the quartet's life and figured in the DaPonte's decision to stay in mid-coast Maine.

Earlier, I had asked violinist Dean Arthur Stein, who'd been with the DSQ from 1996 to 2002 (and is now artistic and executive director of the Arcady Music Festival near Bar Harbor), what had brought the DaPontes to this decision. Stein told me, "Up here, nothing is rushed. We had the luxury of being able to take the time to mature to a whole new level, to develop a group sound that people learned to recognize. People would come up to us and say, 'I heard you on the radio and knew immediately it was the DaPonte.'"

The quartet first performed in Maine in the summer of 1987, while still conservatory students. Their nine concerts were well received, and they returned the following summer. They gave their first formal concert as the DaPonte in Philadelphia in 1991 and came to the mid-coast for a first full year in 1995, via a CMA/NEA rural residency. "I think it gradually dawned on us, maybe in the third year of our grant, that with cell phones, computers, we could get our work done up here, without having to fight other freelancers in New York," Stein said. "We could be the musicians we aspired to be, work as long as we needed on the whole Beethoven cycle in these pristine conditions. We could actually be based here, have an international career and a civilized life."

Even better, some people wanted to support them in this quest. "In our third year," Mark Preston said, "people who cared came to us and asked, 'What would it take to keep you here? What do you need? How can we help you stay?'"

Lawyer Robert Gregory, whose children studied with quartet members, explains, "These guys have a credibility and respect and devotion of people in the community, and they provide a traditional skill that has almost disappeared. That way of learning itself is worth preserving. Myles has spent more hours with his instrument than a brain surgeon on his."

"We're all enriched by their presence," adds Blythe Edwards, an early board member. "They add to the cultural life of Maine. A group of people got together to create a not-for-profit board that could fundraise, increase the musicians' base pay, get them health insurance, provide some underlying security for the hectic life they've chosen."

Gregory facilitated planning at the outset of the grant period. "We had regular sessions in my barn; my wife cooked dinner. We needed a strategic plan. The elements of day-to-day support were a three-legged stool: Each would teach students. There would be some revenue from performance and some community service. Fundraising would be needed, but money follows the mission, so we asked the DaPontes what they really wanted, and they said their focus was on excellent playing and the quartet's career."

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