

Making Music, Loving Music

Music: Portals at Hotchkiss

MARSDEN EPWORTH

Somewhere among her family's treasures is a photo of Sarah Roffman, standing on a porch, in her diapers.

She's 2 years old.

She's playing a violin.

It's 1/32nd the size of a normal instrument.

"I was begging to play from the moment I could speak," she tells me.

Twenty-seven years later this Naumburg-Award winner plays a beautiful and treasured J.B. Guadagnini, dated 1776; she performs as a soloist and as a chamber player; and she teaches young people to love classical music and to play it.

Which goes to show that Sinichi Suzuki was on to something: The Japanese violinist and teacher figured children can learn an instrument at a very early age just the way they learn a language: by example, with encouragement, in small steps, and by ear (with the goal of elevating lives, not just making squads of professional string players).

So that's how Roffman started playing as a youngster in Tenafly, NJ, a suburban township not far from Manhattan. (Her mother, Dorothy Roffman, teaches children violin using the Suzuki method, too, but Sharon was never her student.)

Now Roffman is back for a third summer at The Hotchkiss School, playing in the resident quartet and coaching gifted young string players in Portals, the school's intense three-week chamber music program.

This afternoon she is working with two young violinists, a violist and a cellist for a performance of the first movement

of Mendelssohn's String Quartet in A Minor.

The four girls are very serious.

"Here's my question," Roffman says, sitting in a circle with her players after listening to their opening. She is small, girlish, and like one of them ("My bad," she says after making a wrong bow mark in the first violinist's music.)

"Does diminuendo mean retard?" she asks.

They shake their heads vigorously.

"Of course not," she agrees. "Play softer, but don't play slower."

This is not so easy, even for 12- to 15-year-olds who have been playing about as long as they can remember.

"More bow speed," she tells 12-year-old violinist Tabitha Oh from Chicago, "but very little pressure."

Tabitha, glued to her task, nods once and plays again. She uses more bow.

So, there's technique, and then there's art.

Roffman knows about that, too. "This section has to make the little hairs on my arm stand up," Roffman tells her players. "It can't be just another diminished chord."

She stops them again. To go from *piano* to *fortissimo* in seven measures, "Keep the lid on and then make a volcano," she urges. "It has to be, 'God, the world is falling apart.'"

Roffman has had a lot of fine teachers, among them Nicole Di Cecco at the Manhattan School of Music, an elegant French woman, glamorous, sharp, who knows how to reach her players; Peter Winograd, who inspired Roffman to love the music she played; Donald Weilerstein, who talked about wine and food as well as music; and the estimable

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Sharon Roffman practicing for a performance in Elfers Hall with pianist and Portals' Artistic Director Melwin Chen.

Photo: Marsden Epworth

... When Music Makes the Point

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Itzhak Perlman with whom Roffman made her Carnegie Hall debut in 2004. In the four years she studied with Perlman at his violin camp in East Hampton, Roffman learned more than technique and repertory. She learned life as a soloist is a killer. "The performer with the kind of career every young violinist aspired to was burned out with that life." Perlman, she said, had to force himself to diversify, a lesson Roffman picked up early.

She performs, coaches, teaches; she has sung on "Sesame Street"; composed a sextet for strings and winds performed at Lincoln Center; recorded a piece she wrote to accompany a TV/radio commercial; and she created a seminar juxtaposing fine wines and fine violins. Really. She did.

And then there's what she calls "my little project": Class Notes. "I was critical about how music is taught in public schools." She means programs that hand out instruments for bands or orchestras that are led by people who play one instrument and are taught a smattering about all the rest. "It's like hiring a scientist to teach poetry," she says. They may do it, but they're probably not good at it.

Which is why "a lot of school orchestras and bands sound terrible. How could you make music without the tools to create it?" Teaching an instrument is an intimate and singular affair, she says. "When a student told me, 'We just put one finger down in the right place at the right time,' I knew something was missing."

That would be love. So Roffman started thinking about ways to inspire a new generation to love music, "to show them how expressive music could be." Music history is a waste of time, she figured. But linking music to class studies could illuminate both. Which is how Class Notes came to be. She worked with teachers, rounded up performers and, for a class studying medieval history and the Renaissance, performed the music of French 14th-century composer/poet Guillaume de Machaud and Renaissance English composer William Byrd. She wanted to show how Machaud's lofty, grand open intervals represented the power and influence of the church, and how Byrd's tighter harmonies reflected change and an earthier, more human sensibility. "The music made the point," she tells me. In the right hands, it always does.

And the following Saturday, in Elfers Hall at Hotchkiss, the quartet she coached that week played the Mendelssohn with passion. And love.

All Portals concerts are free and open to the public. July 3, 7:30 p.m., *The Brentano String Quartet*; July 5, 4:30 p.m., *Student chamber music*; 7:30 p.m., *Brentano Quartet and faculty*; July 6, 7:30 p.m., *Faculty vocal concert*; July 9, 7:30 p.m., *Student vocal concert*; 7:30 p.m., *Orion String Quartet*; July 12, *Student chamber music*; 7:30 p.m., *Orion Quartet, Ida Kavafian, faculty*. All performances in Elfers Hall. For information, call 860-435-5576.



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New York Herald Tribune

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Thom Rivera, Gareth Saxe, Tommy Schrider, and Allison Vanous
July 22 - August 9

UNICORN THEATRE

Pageant Play

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Directed by Martha Banta

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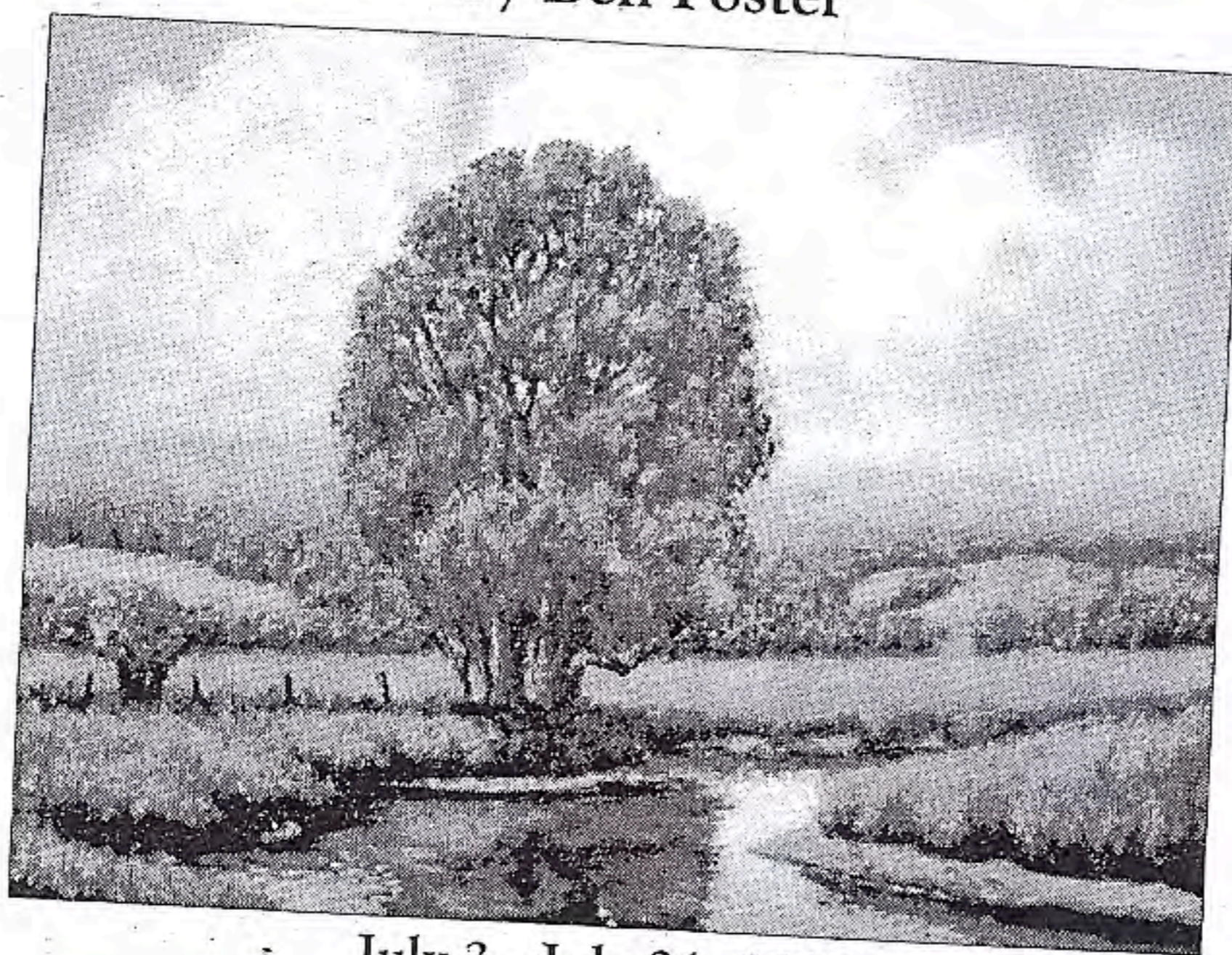
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