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# Across Their Far-Flung Chambers

By Benjamin Pomerance



Esther Rogers Baker

THIS IS A story of fate. Or perhaps it is a story of coincidence, depending on your point of view.

The experts say that a chamber ensemble is the most intimate expression, a small group of musicians pivoting between tension and release, homogeneity and individuality. Pianist Rose Chancler, cellist Esther Rogers Baker and soprano Katherine Comegys Mongulla will embark upon that game on Nov. 9 and 10 — playing together as the Lyricus Trio, showcasing music by Aaron Copland, André Previn and several other gifted American composers.

But it is the story that brings them to this place—a concert series in the parlor of a historic home in Elizabethtown — that merits examining first. The journey is as unlikely as it is familiar, three strong-willed humans with a passion that chose them early and shook each of them by the shoulders until they finally listened. The lessons of where they have been and why they are now here bear remembering. The

forces that delivered them here are worth celebrating.

## Esther Rogers Baker

She stared down at the book, hands trembling. The cover remained closed. Inside resided paragraphs of temptation — or, worse yet, of inevitability. Jacqueline Du Pré, one of the finest cellists ever to walk the planet, was the subject of that volume. The passages within told the tale of a woman's call to pledge her life to her instrument's mysteries and nuances, an odyssey that neither sought not expected an ending point. The 16 year old would not read such words. She knew that the sentences would tell her something terrifying about herself.

"I couldn't open it," Esther Rogers Baker remembers of that book, her traveling companion on a trip to Italy's Orvieto Musica festival, "because I knew deep inside that I needed to be a cellist, that I needed to accept this about myself, and I couldn't."

She understood the quest. "There is a sound," she states. "Most recordings cannot catch this sound, when all the elements of weight, placement, speed, intonation, pressure, intention, connection, understanding, projection — they come together for one second." That one second of bliss, she knew, was worthy of dozens of hours of practice — not that she particularly enjoyed practicing. "As a teenager," she recalls, "music was a labyrinth of difficulties."

But there was hope. "My teachers," she continues, "were my guides through a confusing wilderness, bushwhacking through that frustration and failure, guiding me one note at a time, one skill at a time, pointing out the beauty until I could start to use the tools myself to find my way."

And there was even companionship, initially discovered long before those teenage years hit. "I can recall the first time

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Katherine Comegys Mongulla

that my teacher and I played a duet in my lesson," she remembers. "I think it was an off-handed suggestion she made to play a duet. Maybe I forgot my books or hadn't practiced. I was about 8 years old. I was immediately in awe of what

we sounded like together, that thing, that awe of two parts working together. It was so fun. It was magic."

Yet magic can be frightening for the magician. "I had no money for college," she says. "I wasn't good at practicing. Certain people around me didn't think women — or musicians — should attend college, and my teacher had told me it would take six years of professional training along with six years of practicing six hours a day in order to get where I wanted to go, that sound I wanted — all that in addition to what I had already done, 10 years of lessons and practice. And there was absolutely no way I could comprehend myself able to do that."

Still, there she was at Orvieto Musica, an ocean away from her native city of Rochester, N.Y. and a chasm away from any shred of comfort. At first, she wondered why she had come at all, scared to be anything but as closed as that unread book about Du Pré.

But a cover throbbing to be opened cannot remain forever shut. "And then I am paired for a duet with a successful adult professional violinist," she remembers. "And after a concert, she sits me down, and she tells me definitively that I must pursue this, that I have to become a cellist; I need to go to conservatory for music, that I could do it. And she wiped away each one of the reasons why I couldn't in one conversation sitting on a sidewalk while the sun went down."

The sun came up after that. She earned a degree from the Hartt School in Connecticut and then added a master's degree from the San Francisco Conservatory, focusing on chamber music, recapturing the sensation that saturated her soul while playing that first duet. "On occasion when something really lines up, particularly blends or combines to make one sound so accurate and beautiful, I get that same surge of excitement," she says. "A shock of, 'Yes. This is something.'"

Now, she plays the solo cello works of J.S. Bach. She

plays music written for electronically manipulated sounds. She's collaborated with legendary pianist Menahem Pressler and the esteemed Miami String Quartet. She's collaborated with the Crane School of Music to improvise on her cello the score of the silent film *The Passion of Joan*.

She lives in the North Country now, moving to the region after marrying Gene V. Baker, a fellow musical omnivore. She leads the Community String Orchestra, comprised of area residents of all ages and ability levels and walks of life, a melting pot of music-making that will present a performance showcasing their work on Nov. 23 at noon in Keene Central School.

And she is a teacher. Like those guides who ushered through her adolescent explorations, she is now the influencer, helping the next group of tentative pupils chase that elusive sound. "When that sound happens in a lesson or a professional rehearsal or concert, it is the same exact spark of excitement for me — the 'Yes!'" she explains. "I make myself available for my students who are lost in the wilderness of trying to play their instrument and for the potential for those moments. When I see a 'Yes!' in their eyes, it makes me happy."

### Katherine Comegys Mongulla

The television was broken. Inside the home in AuSable Forks, the strife seemed unbearable. And then the physical education teacher and the home health nurse delivered the crushing blow: choosing not to fix it, allowing the TV screen to remain blank while life went on around it.

But that was when the door opened. "My parents made us listen to National Public Radio," Katherine Comegys Mongulla remembers. "And also these CBC [Canadian Broadcasting Corporation] re-broadcasts of BBC [British Broadcasting Corporation] radio plays." And amid all of that listening, Mongulla began to absorb a fascination with all things musical and particularly the sound of the human voice.

At first, it was a competition. Her speaking voice was

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low, leaving everyone thunderstruck when she started projecting stratospheric notes. “How high could I sing?” she asks rhetorically. “How fast could I sing? I treated singing like a kind of a sport in the beginning. And it was a while before I could un-learn that competitive mindset.”

She wanted to become a rock star. She thrilled at the creatively percussive thrashings of Jethro Tull and Yes and the more mellow stylings of James Taylor. Opera, despite her natural coloratura vocal range, couldn’t have been further from her ambitions. “At that age,” she laughs, “I thought that all female classical vocalists were these fat women in helmets with a wobble so wide you could drive a truck through it.”

But then came a surprise. She left AuSable Forks — “escaped,” as she viewed it at the time — to enroll at the College of St. Rose in Albany, studying recording engineering. All students in that major needed to take a music history course. So, she sat down in the classroom, expecting to be tortured by recordings of more fat women in helmets, and suddenly found herself drawn to the edge of her chair by a rendition of the Queen of the Night’s vengeance aria from Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*.

“The competitive side of me kicked in,” she remembers of the aria’s rapid-fire passages on the peaks of the vocal Himalayas. “I simply had to do that.”

She began to study both classical and jazz vocal repertoire, all while continuing on to earn that recording engineering degree. “I graduated just in time for my skill set to become obsolete,” she recalls. “Everything switched over from tape to digital. All of the technical skills that I had learned about being a recording engineer went out of date seemingly overnight.”

With that door closed, she pushed a new window open. She earned a graduate degree from the Hartt School in vocal performance and got a job teaching voice lessons at a college in Williamsport, Penn. Still, something was missing. After four years of teaching, she resolved that she would find it. She auditioned for the prestigious Manhattan School of Music and was accepted, studying with the revered dramatic baritone Sherrill Milnes, excising the last vestiges of her condemnations about fat women wearing helmets.

Ultimately, her career took her down a path that seemed far more lucrative and stable, working in New York as a research coordinator at the titanic finance firm Lehman Brothers and then in Chicago as a project coordinator for Lincoln Financial. But in the scarce hours that remained, the music continued. “I have to sing,” she states. “I don’t know what I would do or who I would be if I couldn’t. I can’t let it go. It feels as necessary to me as breathing.”

So, she kept on singing — even running an opera company out of the living room of her Chicago home, pushing all of the furniture out of the way so she could rehearse with her newfound colleagues. They performed productions from that homespun but devoted atmosphere in 2011 and 2012, with Mongulla having the time of her life.

The only problem was that life got in the way. A divorce left her as the single mother of three children under the age of 5. In July 2016, she returned to AuSable Forks to pursue a teaching job, buying a house next-door to the property where she grew up. In addition to substitute teaching in the area schools, she rents rooms in her home on Air B&B. Recently, she earned her paralegal certificate. “I do what I can to make a living,” she states.

But the singing remains alive and well — and so does the teaching, with Mongulla maintaining a small vocal studio inside her home. “Teaching voice is very personal,” she states. “The students themselves are the instrument. You have to take some risks — play with your voice as if it were a toy, find out what it is capable of, find its limits and see what it can do.”

#### Rose Chancler

She went to a Catholic school in Texas, an oddity right away amid the region’s flood of Baptist congregations. A nun at the school taught piano and organ, the cultivator of players for the school’s noontime Mass services. “I

don’t think she ever hit me with a ruler,” Rose Chancler remembers. “But she cracked the whip. She was a hard-core piano teacher.”

Still, amid the discipline, there was something appealing to the young pupil. Around the age of 8, she played the organ during Mass for the first time and became enthralled by the power of the sound that she was able to make. It was the perfect outlet for the kid who quickly grew restless if forced to sit in the pews during the service. “I liked the idea of being on that organ bench, way above everybody else,” she recalls. “It was cool.”

Now, she had an identity. She was a musician. At least she was for a little while — until her parents moved her to a public school, away from that piano-teaching nun, and she decided that she wanted to quit. Her mother forbade her from ceasing her piano studies, which made the young adolescent all the more resolute in her insistence on never touching the keyboard again.

Finally, mother and daughter reached a truce. They identified a new private teacher for the daughter, someone who knew enough not to push a teenager who didn’t want to be pushed. “She was the perfect person for that time in my life,” Chancler states. “She became a confidant for me, even though I certainly wasn’t her prize pupil. And she kept me in it.”

She kept Chancler in it enough for the student to receive a music scholarship to West Texas State University. Yet she nearly bailed there, too, faced with a teacher who exercised all of the gentleness of Rasputin. But luck grinned a second time. At a solo competition, she met a man who turned out to be the head of the music department of the University of Texas at Austin. She went to a summer camp that the man ran at the college and liked it enough that she decided to enroll at the university full-time.

“They had just built a state-of-the-art facility at [the University of Texas at Austin],” she remembers. “They had more Steinways than anybody else at the time. They recruited an incredible faculty.” She pauses. “It was just a magical time. And that was where it all began.”

She’s modest about where it all went from there. In any event, a life spent performing classical music’s great works in enough places to fill an entire atlas warrants a book, not a mere corner of an article. “I was very nomadic for a while,” she laughs, reeling of an array of homes and jobs that brought her everywhere from Alaska to Iowa and a litany of performances that have taken her throughout practically every region of America and Europe.

When she arrived in the North Country in 2003, she never intended to settle here for more than a few years. Yet she has unexpectedly found a home in this place where she can perform regularly, cultivate concerts — her Piano By Nature series on which this particular program appears — and teach. “The mark of a great teacher,” she explains, “is when their students can use your information in different ways — not as carbon copies of the teacher, but as individuals who have used what you’ve taught to help them find their own unique voices.”

And from the right unique voices, she continues, comes collaborations like the Lyricus Trio, where three gifted musicians wind up in a place where they never expected to be doing things that they never expected to do and find a sacred patch of common ground. “I think that we all react well to each other,” she says. “We all have a real love and commitment to the music and a sense of fun, too. It’s one of those things where you come together, and you’re not sure how it will be. But you quickly realize that it is all going to work out just fine.”

*The Lyricus Trio will perform on Nov. 9 at 7 p.m. and Nov. 10 at 3 p.m. in the parlor of the historic Hand House in Elizabethtown, N.Y. For more information or to purchase tickets, call 518-962-8899, email pianobynature@gmail.com or visit pianobynature.org.*

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