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Hamptons Music Camp's A Learning Experience

By Ken Smith

ABOUT 3½ YEARS AGO, Toby Perlman attended a meeting of East End residents wanting to start a summer music festival in the Hamptons. Neither she nor her husband, Itzhak, the renowned violinist, had much interest in the idea. "We'd left Aspen specifically to get away from the festival," she says.

But one thing came up that did interest her: the idea of music education. At the meeting, she outlined her longtime dream of an intimate pre-college program focusing on solo playing rather than chamber or orchestral performance, with no competition between participants and teaching tailored to each member's individual learning style.

"The world is competitive," Perlman says from her East Hampton home. "That's the reality. But it doesn't have to be when you're thirteen years old."

At that meeting, Perlman spoke with Suki Sandler, a theatrical producer and Carnegie Hall board member, and they set out to make the program happen. Nothing came of plans for that particular festival, but the first season of Perlman's Hamptons Summer Music opened seven months later.

Now in its third season, the program runs for two weeks each August at East Hampton's Boys' Harbor Camp. Steinway & Sons donates more than a dozen pianos, and local support has come from businesses such as North Fork Bank and East End residents including Lillian Vernon, Alan Alda and Billy Joel (who taught a master class the first summer). The students range in age from 11 to 18.

"The real growth, though, has been in the faculty and the level of students," Sandler says. "The Perlmans didn't ask anyone for favors; they wanted their friends to see what was happening and then come to us." The pianist Joseph Kalichstein, for example, offered to give a master class (scheduled for next Friday) after seeing HSM students perform at a benefit last spring at Manhattan's Pierre Hotel.

A program stressing its noncompetitiveness relies on the discipline — both musical and personal

— of its participants, Toby Perlman admits. Students come by audition and through referrals; this year's roster of 35 reaches as far as Finland, Austria, France and Germany. "We don't want it to grow in terms of size, only in terms of length and new programs," Perlman says. "I'd love to have a twenty-five acre estate for twelve weeks a year, but that kind of space is so expensive. We could go upstate or to Vermont, like other programs do. But for us, the stars are here and they're not leaving."

Itzhak Perlman will conduct the camp's string orchestra on Thursday. Violinist and conductor Pinchas Zukerman, a Montauk resident, has been known to walk into chamber-music sessions and begin impromptu coachings. Students have a chance to see musicians become immediate role models, and other Hamptons residents have a chance to see some top-notch music-making



Pinchas Zukerman, left, and Itzhak Perlman at Hamptons Summer Music '96

ing in their own neighborhood for free.

"My goal is to see what we do impact on the community, the way Marlboro and Tanglewood impact on their communities," Toby Perlman says. "The public becomes very musically knowledgeable and sophisticated, but that happens over many years. Right now they just need to know we exist." ■

For information regarding events and open rehearsals, call Sandra Morell at 516-329-7405. Hamptons Summer Music runs through Aug. 24.

Ken Smith is a free-lance writer.