



ABOVE: the WPA Trio with cellist Sarah Kapps and violinists Marisa Polesky and Christopher Pulgram, dressed to perform and surrounded by mountain scenery; **LEFT:** the view from Cooper's Whole with the Wintergreen Resort nestled into the mountainside; **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Composer Larry Alan Smith listening to a rehearsal.

BY WENDY K. PROBST

The view of the lush, rolling Blue Ridge Mountains is alluring from an outcrop known as Cooper's Whole, which sits on a portion of the Appalachian Trail in Wintergreen, Virginia. Intermingled into this mountain-side vista is the Wintergreen Resort, an environmentally mindful area attraction. Cooper's Whole takes its name from Dr. Byron Cooper, a Virginia Tech geologist whose research of the area and philosophy of sound land stewardship became the basis for the development of the resort. Take a hike along this part of the A.T. in midsummer and you are likely to hear the unexpected sound of live chamber music.

This past summer, the A.T. and Appalachian history were combined with symphony music, dance performances, and plays at the Wintergreen Resort during the 2009 Wintergreen Summer Music Festival and Academy presented by the Wintergreen Performing Arts (WPA). The resort is the official home of the Wintergreen Performing Arts, a non-profit, education-focused organization that produces a first-class summer music festival each year, featuring symphonic and chamber concerts, as well as other performing arts programs. The theme of the '09 festival was "Appalachian Roots—A Cultural Kaleidoscope," an idea—sparked by WPA board members—which came to fruition through the vision of WPA's artistic and executive director Larry Alan Smith.

For Smith, a Julliard educated composer, who at one point studied under Nadia Boulanger—the same composer who taught Aaron Copeland—it felt very natural to blend the culture and history of Appalachia into the world of classical music and performing arts. "Being a classical music festival is a very important piece of it. I decided early on that we would explore the cultures that settled the Appalachian mountains and I didn't want to leave it just for one segment of the mountains; I wanted to do it as a whole, up and down the East Coast. That made it very rich in terms of the classical music, because we could explore German, English, Irish and Moravian, and quite a few different cultures as well as American, African American and some Na-





LEFT: student musicians from the Wintergreen Summer Music Academy play chamber music along the Old A.T. as part of “An Appalachian Amble”; BELOW: a Potomac Appalachian Trail Club volunteer naturalist from the Wintergreen Nature Foundation speaks about the area’s history, as well as local flora and fauna, as participants walk along the trail during the Appalachian Amble.



tive American,” says Smith. He also made sure to include traditional Appalachian music, and even managed to procure a performance by famous American traditional musician and singer Mike Seeger. “His time with us was so well received by people,” says Smith. “They loved him; they loved hearing about Appalachian music and the old time music that he was so famous for preserving, documenting, and performing. Old time music was very much a part of the festival and was intertwined with the classical music that we presented.”

During the opening weekend of the festival, an unusual hiking experience was offered to those who took a 45 minute stroll along the Old Appalachian Trail, which runs through the resorts property. It was aptly named, “An Appalachian Amble” and was presented in partnership with the Wintergreen Nature Foundation (TWNF), also a non-profit, charitable, education-focused organization that maintains two nature preserves and 30 miles of hiking trails in the area. “The nature foundation is extremely active in preserving and protecting the land around Wintergreen, and it just seemed like a natural to involve them,” says Smith. “They were able to include nature walks, two-day hikes on the A.T., and the Appalachian Amble . . . what we did was identify the old A.T. before it was redirected around the property. [We]

positioned three chamber music ensembles from our academy and interspersed them with naturalists from the nature foundation who spoke about the people who used to live there, the types of trees, and rock formations. As people would walk this segment they could hear music, they could hear about the natural features of the land, and we even had an Appalachian story teller, who we featured on opening night.”

The chamber music ensembles that played during the “Appalachian Amble” were part of the Wintergreen Summer Music Academy. The academy consists of a four-week program that allows talented, young musicians to work with an exceptional group of professional musicians at the Wintergreen Resort—and offers private lessons, chamber music coaching, seminars, and performance opportunities. Students of the academy are also invited to attend concerts, lectures, theatre performances, and other events at the summer music festival. “I really enjoy working with the students,” says Smith. “I enjoy the challenge of taking them from where they are and trying to get them to the next place . . . following their progress; trying to figure out how to get them to understand something; to open up their ears and their minds.” WPA also works with the Nelson County Public School System to bring performing

artists into the schools. The program, which has support from several other local and national organizations, brings hours of performances and workshops to approximately 7,000 kindergarten through 12th grade students each year.

In fact, it is a student event that Smith favors just slightly above all others at the summer festival. “I programmed a mixture called Music in Unusual Places, [along with] a reading of the works of conservationist John Burroughs, and it was just absolutely magnificent at sunset to have a group of our academy students playing on one of the overlooks (which looked out over the Shenandoah Valley)...it was just breathtaking,” he says. Other events at the 2009 festival included wine and whisky tastings, guided hikes, and an Appalachian Film Festival. “In 2009 there were 228 events...the goal was to create an environment where people would spend a weekend, a week, or a month exploring whatever the theme was for the summer and we have managed to accomplish that for sure,” says Smith.

During the early planning of the ’09 festival it was decided to use the A.T. as a “unifying factor.” “We would symbolically hike from Springer Mountain to Katahdin and we would divide the festival into the four weeks [of virtual hiking],” explains

Smith. He contacted the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) and spoke to chief operating officer Steve Paradis. “He was very kind to listen to what I had to say.” Paradis ended up speaking at the festival about the Trail, and the significance of protecting and preserving it. “Having Steve come and talk was a real treat and that really tied it together; [his] presence solidified the Appalachian Trail Conservancy’s involvement,” says Smith, “... the fact that Steve had hiked the Trail was also super.” By working in collaboration with ATC and eight other environmentally focused organizations, Smith and his fellow festival coordinators were able to expand their programming to bring more awareness to each one.

By the time it all came together, the Trail was indeed a key factor. Smith felt that the concept of the Trail could make people understand the melding of nature, culture, and the arts. “The A.T. caught my imagination very early on in my life. It’s one of those things where I’ve always said, ‘I really would love to hike that.’ And I’ve taken time to make sure that I go up on the Trail in various places to experience it. It’s such an incredible national treasure,” he says. “It just seems to me that its one of those things, that before one leaves this world, it’s something that one should do, and that I would love to do. And I guess what I am fasci-



nated about is the ability to protect the land over such a long span of so many miles; and in terms of people who walk the Trail, I have nothing but the highest respect that they could have the physical and mental endurance to actually do it.”

At the beginning of each event, Smith made it a point to speak to the audience to remind them of where they were “conceptually” on their trek along the Trail, and where they were going next. “At the end of the second week, we had a good time. We ‘reached’ Pennsylvania and actually had an ice cream social following the last concert; and we served Hershey’s ice cream, the same kind of ice cream you would get at the ‘half gallon challenge’ at the Pine Grove Furnace State Park general store,” says Smith.

As one of only three WPA staff members, Larry Alan Smith is responsible for the artistic, as well as the logistical and fiscal side of things. “I have to be as involved with the spreadsheets as I am with planning the programs,” he says. “And I think it’s actually healthy for an organization to have someone like that. It means that the artistic person has to be responsible at the expenditure and it creates a good balance between the artistic and the management sides. I can only blame myself for anything on either side of the line.” But Smith explains that the WPA also depends heavily on its talented and hard working board of directors, as well as scores of volunteers, to keep the organization running smoothly, and to successfully carry off the summer music festival each year. “There is a tremendous group of people [at Wintergreen]. I love working with the board and with the people who live there; the group of musicians and artists who are involved with the festival are like a family... its really a tremendous environment and I think it all boils down to [working with] people,” says Smith. Financial support comes from individuals as well as

corporate sponsors, but WPA does not have an endowment, so when each new fiscal year begins their balance starts again at zero.

Since its inception in 1995, the WPA has been hosting performances, starting in private homes in the Wintergreen area. In 1997, WPA launched the first Wintergreen Summer Music Festival, as well as initiating their education program with the Nelson County Public School System; and in 1998 festival artists began performing at the newly constructed John D. Evans Center at the Wintergreen Resort. WPA also hosts several other events and performances throughout the year. To kick off their 2010 summer music festival season, in which Vienna is the theme, the WPA presented the Vienna Boys Choir to a sold out audience in October, and the Virginia Consort will perform choral music during “A Blue Ridge Christmas” concert on December 13. For those who enjoy more traditional mountain music there will also be a Blue Ridge Mountain Music Festival in August.

“[The festival] rages for a month; everybody is working so hard, we have incredible volunteers... it’s just a really energizing and thoroughly exhausting month, but it’s really worth every minute of it,” says Smith who has taken the once local festival to a more regional level. “The next step then would be to become a nationally recognized festival, and I think we’re building to that.” He and others at WPA are hoping that the diversity of the festival will attract people with all sorts of interests. This is why other arts have been added over the years, explains Smith. “There are some people for whom music may not be as important as others, but they may enjoy theater, or dance, or film. Putting all of these things together into the month-long festival allows us to hopefully have something for everyone. It would be hard to imagine that someone couldn’t find a number of things that wouldn’t be of interest.” In the end, he says the draw for the festival is based on a simple concept: “people love to go to beautiful places and enjoy great music and great art. So it’s a winning combination and we are just so fortunate at Wintergreen to have the setting with mountains all around us; it’s just a beautiful, perfect place to come.”

For more information visit:

www.wintergreenperformingarts.org



OPPOSITE PAGE: WPA orchestra members in a performance called “Musicians in the Mountains”; FROM TOP: the John D. Evans Center at twilight with the A.T. in the distant background; the WPA Orchestra rehearses with guest conductor Josep Caballé-Domenech, photo by John S. Taylor.