

# From backyard to performance stage

## With its founder set to retire, Spencer Brook String Festival continues to grow

By Casey Lyons  
STAFF WRITER

In a Saturday morning in late August, the margins of a performance space are filled with opened instrument cases, backpacks, yellow folders and scattered pieces of sheet music.

An expectant crowd waits patiently as the first small group of students emerges from the wings, stringed instruments in hand, and takes its place on the stage. Now everything seems less important; cell phones stay quiet, chatter ceases and the group begins to play.

This is the final showcase of young talent at the Spencer Brook String Festival, and resident and musician Barbara Marden watches for the last time as the head of the week-long festival she founded.

Throughout the morning, she does not sit; instead seeming to materialize in different

places to help groups make their cues, and help individual students locate lost pieces of sheet music.

Through its evolution, the Spencer Brook String Festival has gone from a backyard and spare room celebration of music, to a small army of 60 or more eager young students. If there is a person responsible for the proliferation of string music among Concord's youth, it is Marden.

It was after a casual conversation with a colleague that Marden, the longest-playing member of the Concord Orchestra, came to start the festival, 20 years ago. During that talk, Marden heard of these types of community based music organizations. Simply put, she said, "We tried it and it worked out well."

She acknowledges the Concord Area Music School Association and its strong program that drove the initial years of the string festival. Apparently

musical talent, teaching ability and the desire to do so were all homegrown, all it needed was someone to put things together.

The first year, about 30 school-aged participants put their names on the roster for the program, Marden remembered. In a great departure from the size and scale of this year's festival, the first year showcased young talent against the backdrop of Marden's kitchen window.

"We played on a terrace in front of the kitchen window, with the audience on the front lawn," she recalled.

Paul Leder, the festival music director and Marden's successor, recalled students spaced around Marden's house, and every available area, be those bedrooms or the kitchen, were occupied by young string players.

Julie Marden, Barbara's daughter who now coaches for the festival, described an ad hoc start to the string festival: "She would pack them in bedrooms, bathrooms, wherever she could find room, she would stick them in that room," she said.

These days, Barbara Marden continues to work with Leder and a dozen coaches. Things continue to grow.

Leder pushed to expand the program's reach and draw students from beyond Concord's close geographical confines. With the renewed interest in stringed instruments, the festival found itself outgrowing Marden's Lowell Road home.

It grew out of the kitchen and into the fields; outdoor tents replaced the kitchen terrace. It grew until it reached the Friends of Performing Arts in Concord building at 51 Walden St., and the Trinitarian Congregational Church across the street.

Said a humble Marden, "You start something and it grows by itself."

"This is a great opportunity for us to share music with the kids," Leder said, adding that the festival encourages a fun and playful atmosphere.

Despite the growing size of the program from a dozen participants to 80 at its largest, Leder said the goal is to "maintain the sense of community and even though it's a big uni-



Graham Hotchkiss, 13, of Sudbury, waits between performances with his cello at the Spencer Brook String Festival's end-of-the-week performance Saturday at 51 Walden St.



Nora Princiotti of Walpole, N.H. goes over the '1812 Overture' by Tchaikovsky backstage.

A trio of cellos sits waiting for student fingers in the lobby of 51 Walden St.

Maxine Keyes, left, and Iman Sakkaf demonstrate their musical skills.



fied project, it's an awful lot of fun."

While some came to the festival with very little prior experience—sometimes as little as six months—others already had talent, and the festival provided both the setting for improvement, and a chance to shake of the summer cobwebs.

"One of the reasons we decided to do it at the end of the summer was to get [students] warmed up for the year," she said.

With its doctrine of fun and inclusion, the Spencer Brook String Festival reaches out to young area musicians, and keeps them coming back for the late summer festival.

Marden said she has enjoyed seeing the same faces return year after year and watching their skills and talents blossom.

"They have a good time and form friends," Marden said of her returning students. "It's fun to play together."

*"We played on a terrace in front of the kitchen window, with the audience on the front lawn."*

Barbara Marden

"I enjoy the opportunity to play string music and it helps me get back into playing mode," said Emily Hager, a Concord resident, and senior at Concord-Carlisle High School. Hager has returned to the late summer festival every summer for seven years.

Marden's grandchildren and children also take part in the festival, which has become a family tradition of sorts.

Julie Marden said the Spencer Brook String Festival staff plans to start a scholarship in honor of her mother. The idea is to help in the continuing pursuit of stringed music.

"We want it for a graduating senior from a high school in

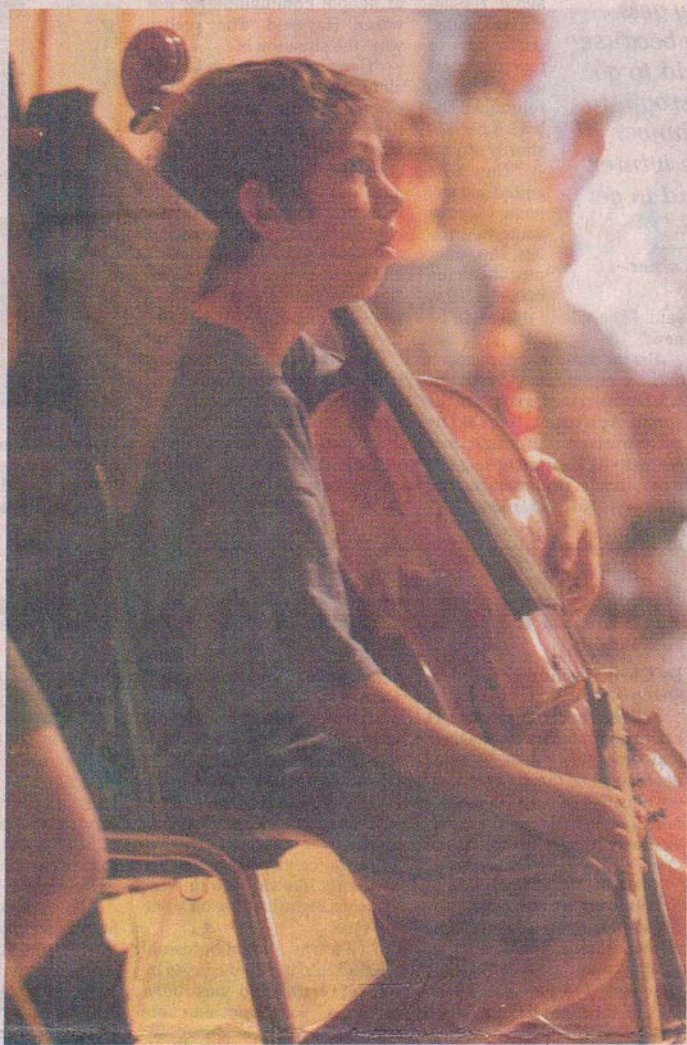
the area," she said.

And though this will be her last year at the forefront of the Spencer Brook String Festival, Marden plans to remain active with Concord's youth musicians.

"I will still be teaching," she said of her private instruction. "I still want to share in the excitement of making music and how important it is."

As for the future of the program, Marden is confident in Leder's ability to guide the program artistically, and preserve the fun atmosphere that has come to characterize the festival.

"I'm leaving it in good hands, absolutely," she said.



## Off-stage strings

STAFF PHOTO BY SHAWN LYNCH

Patrick Menzi-McDonough waits off to the side for his turn on stage at the Spencer Brook String Festival's Saturday performance at 51 Walden St. See pictures and story, Page 29.

Danny Linke, left, 10, Cray Novik, middle, 11, and James Hotchkiss, 9, relax at the back of the auditorium during Saturday's Spencer Brook String Festival at 51 Walden St.