

Our Berkshires



Quintessentially summer

By Richard Nunley

NEW LEBANON, N.Y.

LAST WEDNESDAY evening we enjoyed a quintessentially Berkshire summer evening. We went to Curtisville Consortium's concert at the Congregational Church in Interlaken.

It was quintessentially Berkshire because it was low-key, off the beaten track, nothing fancy or pretentious, just itself, light and informal (and volunteer) on the management end of things, and musically exceedingly good.

It was "plain living and high thinking" in the realm of music. Plain living and high thinking are, we like to suppose, very Berkshire.

So it was reassuring to sit, well spaced out in the white pews (the audience was not large, and the evening was warm and humid) and contemplate in the minutes before the concert began the shield-shaped plaques on the walls commemorating deacons of the past.

The Curtisville church was an offshoot of the first church over in the center of Stockbridge. It was organized in 1824 as the North Congregational Church in Stockbridge as an accommodation to the residents of the village — it's getting on to five miles from Interlaken to Stockbridge, a long way in horse and wagon days, and longer if you hadn't a horse and had to hoof it yourself.

It should be noted that Interlaken and Curtisville are one and the same. Curtisville was first called Curtis Mills, then Curtisville, and then at some point graced with the more elegant Interlaken.

By whatever name, the village is a section of the town of Stockbridge, which may confuse visitors who suppose that Stockbridge is where the Red Lion is, which it is, but Stockbridge is also Tanglewood and Elm Court and Glendale and Mahkeenack Heights and Rattlesnake Mountain and — well, you just have to know.

According to Mary Flynn's

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What is it about hearing honest good music that re-energizes a listener?

"The Stockbridge Story 1739-1989," Elnathan Curtis of Woodbury, Conn., set up his mills on the site in 1750 to take advantage of the stream flowing out of Stockbridge Bowl. He was joined early on by his brothers Abel and Isaac.

Eventually the water powered sawmills, grist mills, a forge, a tannery, a wool mill, and in season a cider mill to press apples into that era's equivalent of orange juice and beer. In short, the mills powered the local farm-based subsistence economy, serving a walking-distance community much more populous than today's quiet village. At a later time, a chair factory turned out 8,000 chairs a year.

The church the village built in 1827 is beautiful, light and airy, with pleasing proportions and dignified symmetry — and good acoustics. It's a little bit sad that the tides of life have withdrawn from Curtisville/Interlaken and so many other once-vital Berkshire villages and crossroads, leaving them merely residential, non-productive of much of anything, their churches open for services only occasionally, if at all. Curtisville must have been something like "North Dormer," the fictitious Berkshire village Edith Wharton described in her short novel, "Summer."

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A lot of Curtisville — the working Curtisville, and the cheap tenements for employees — disappeared long ago, leaving a village mostly of lovely old houses of quiet dignity and the mansarded Citizen's Hall, once the school and an upstairs assembly room, now housing the bustling and well-equipped Interlaken School of the Arts. At

the end of the village street is a magnificent vegetable-flower garden on a slope that's worth driving by to study from the road, impregnably fortified as it is with fencing and planks against woodchucks, rabbits, coons, deer — quite splendid!

And splendid too was the music — Tatiana Dimitriades, violon, Owen Young, cello, Jonathan Bass, piano — a vivacious Beethoven sonata, five gauzy pieces by Prokofiev, and Dvorak's energizing "Dumky" trio. We went forth into the balmy evening feeling like new.

What is it about hearing honest good music that re-energizes a listener?

It's not a matter of peppy showmanship or beholding celebrity live and in full color or of somebody tickling the ivories in an infectiously toe-tapping way.

To be ponderous about it, I think it is the effect of the pressures generated by the subordination of a powerfully schooled talent to the specifications of an idea notated in the score — feeling in the charge of thought. An abstract drama is enacted and, by the end, resolved. It's a means of transcending the isolating limitations of the self and the moment, a means of access to liberating ideality.

The view is current that music is just entertainment and self-expression, that the only way "serious" music can "survive in the marketplace" is to fuse with pop music.

Andre Previn thinks otherwise. In last Thursday's paper, Seth Rogovoy quoted him as saying in a Tanglewood discussion of music's future that classical music and jazz are "by their very nature diametrically opposed to each other, and there is no need to mix the two."

"No need to mix the two" — that's what the Curtisville Consortium players triumphantly demonstrated last Wednesday evening.

On the way home we stopped in West Stockbridge to top off the evening with some genuine Golden Guernsey Berkshire Ice Cream.