

# The Potential for Magic

Juilliard inspires Aiken students to probe their talents.

“Just play black keys.” That was the only instruction given to a nine-year-old who’d never played a piano. Her instructors were the Juilliard Jazz Ensemble. During their performance at the first Juilliard in Aiken Festival last March, the musicians invited a group of children onstage. They sat her down at their keyboard, gathered around with trombone, sax, guitar and double-bass, and gently nudged her to lead them. “Play anything, but just play the black keys.”

Valiantly taking her dignity into her small fingers, she began banging the black keys. The professionals joined in, improvising flawlessly wherever she wandered. “It sounded like she knew exactly what she was doing,” marveled one witness. “It was like you’d walked into a jazz club.”

The thrill of a lifetime for the incredulous new impresario was one of many “magic moments” at the inaugural festival,

now an annual, weeklong event. The 2010 Juilliard in Aiken Festival is scheduled March 8-12. Faculty and students—some two dozen, last year—from the famous conservatory venture south from New York for a late-winter break of community service, performing around the city and working with local students. Their objective is to inspire. Their rewards are the amazed faces of youngsters who begin to



Isabel Igoe takes instruction

understand their own potential and adults who get to witness world-class presentations close-up. The performers receive a considerable perk: Joye Cottage, the historic abode extraordinaire of Pulitzer Prize-winning authors Gregory White Smith and Steven Naifeh, is their home away from home.

Last March, the cottage itself was the scene of cozy concerts by a viola/cello duo and baritone soloist. The regal intertwining of the American Brass Quintet echoed across the lawn. Elsewhere, the Etheredge Center at USC-Aiken presented the jazz ensemble in a Kids Bop program. The Biava String Quartet performed at First Presbyterian Church. An impassioned piano recital at the Aiken County Historical Museum left attendees in tears. The Washington Center for the Performing Arts was the site of the concluding Showcase Concert featuring multiple Juilliard personnel.

Well-performed music makes for enjoyable listening. Live performances add visual delight. The graceful swaying of string players, earnest facial expressions that change with the mood of the composition, body language and fleeting eye contact that ensure precision among musicians, beat by beat—all of this is absent from audio recordings.

Juilliard in Aiken adds a third, more dramatic dimension: interaction between performers and audiences. It creates priceless memories for Aikenites while sharpening the work of the musicians.

“One of the most fascinating dinners we’ve ever had here in the [Joye Cottage] dining room was when we had the Juilliard jazz group and the string quartet together, talking about audience behavior in the jazz world versus the classical world,” Smith said. While today’s classical concerts are formal, 19th Century classical concerts weren’t, with people talking, milling



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*Gregory White Smith*



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*Steven Naifeh*

around, applauding in the middle after a solo — much like a modern jazz performance.

“The jazz performers talked about how much that immediate audience interaction helps them, gets them into the performance. And the quartet was talking about how in intimate settings, such as we had at some of the performances, when the audience is up near them, how much easier it is to get involved in the music and to perform better.”

In a combined performing/tutoring environment like Juilliard in Aiken, Juilliard students have an additional avenue for improvement and broadening: the opportunity to share what they know. Last March, they went into 12 Aiken County schools to teach workshops and master classes. They gave school performances, playing side-by-side with the students they tutored. They found in Aiken not just a place to rehearse, perform and relax in a quiet setting, but a place where they literally could do some good.

“Some of the most magical moments of the entire festival are the ones that happen in classrooms,” Smith said. “When one of the Juilliard students goes to a local school and stands in front of a group of string players who are struggling with their A strings and plays a Bach violin sonata, and the students are this close to the performer, you can see their eyes widen, and there are just shivers all over the room.”

Developing future audiences is a fifth benefit. “It’s a great way to give kids dignity and a sense of self worth,” Smith pointed out, “but it’s also a way to ensure the future of art.”

**S**andra Field was outreach director for the Aiken Performing Arts Group in 2007 when a Juilliard string quartet was invited to town to perform and work with public school music students. “Amazing” is how she described their impact. “I couldn’t help but wonder how we could build upon this lifetime experience. What would happen if we brought multiple ensembles from Juilliard to Aiken? Could we create a music festival with only Juilliard performers?”

Field approached Laurie Carter, Juilliard’s vice president for legal affairs and executive director of jazz studies. Juilliard definitely was interested. A key to success, Field and Carter both believed, would be to obtain oversight and support from Smith and Naifeh,

who already had established a unique Juilliard-Aiken relationship. In 1996, Smith and Naifeh had bequeathed Joye Cottage to Juilliard.

The authors quickly agreed. “It fit beautifully with their vision to establish a southern home and retreat for Juilliard and to solidify a long-term partnership between our historic and charming city and the world’s top conservatory,” Field said. A nonprofit corporation, Juilliard in Aiken, was organized. Smith and Naifeh are chairman and vice chairman of its executive committee, respectively, with Field as president.

“It’s a new endeavor, started at a very tough time,” Smith acknowledged. “Our first festival was held right in the middle of the economic meltdown, so you can imagine obtaining funding was by no means a cakewalk. I think it’s an indication of the devotion of the people involved and of the importance of what we’re trying to do. The community was completely supportive.”

From Juilliard’s standpoint, Carter observed, it’s important for its students to interact musically with audiences and students outside New York. The growth in performing arts and the emergence of new legions of talented performers mean they no longer can expect to find careers with major orchestras, theatrical troupes and dance companies. Enthusiastic communities like Aiken offer new opportunities.

Juilliard president Joseph W. Polisi remarked, “Nurturing young artists

and the art they produce is an essential element of the American experience.”

That’s what makes Juilliard in Aiken extraordinary, Field thinks. “We knew without a doubt that Juilliard artists are exceptionally talented

“This is really about bringing the joy of music to everybody in the area, not just to serve a select few.” – Gregory White Smith

performers. What became evident during the week was that they are also passionate, generous and caring people.”

David Fulmer, a string teaching artist, bonded with a sixth-grade violinist, and they’ve made plans to keep in touch. The student “never stopped smiling and promised to practice more,” Field recalled. At their Kids Bop concert, the Jazz Ensemble performed for an audience of 500-plus, giving children and their families a chance to dance, play rhythmic instruments and improvise. Virtuoso pianist Elizabeth Joy Roe’s performance at the Trustees Featured Performer Series was “riveting” and “touched the hearts of those who heard her play.”

Juilliard decides which of its students, instructors and performing acts will participate. “They’re very particular about who they choose to represent Juilliard,” Smith explained. “Juilliard has tried to instill into its students a striving for artistic excellence, in the sense that the artist has a responsibility over and above his or her responsibility to the music. There is a very strong strain of community service that is part of the Juilliard curriculum.

“That, of course, dovetails perfectly with our feeling that it’s crucial that this festival have an outreach component, that it isn’t just about bluenoses getting around in their tuxedos and congratulating themselves on their taste in music.

This is really about bringing the joy of music to everybody in the area, not just to serve a select few.”

Planners in Aiken and New York want the festival to expand and other acts introduced. Music is only the beginning. Juilliard is a school for all the performing arts. Dance is coming in 2010, theater in 2011 or 2012.

Smith and Naifeh are graduates of Harvard Law School, where they met in 1974, but aside from one summer internship they’ve never practiced law. They collaborated on their first book while students. They’ve written more than a dozen, four of them national best-sellers. Their biography of painter *Jackson Pollock (Jackson Pollock: An American Saga)* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1991. *Making Miracles Happen* chronicles Smith’s triumph over a brain tumor that was considered inoperable when diagnosed in 1986. Since 2001, most of their energy has been devoted to a biography of Vincent van Gogh, scheduled for autumn 2011 publication.

With their writing careers established in the early 1980s, they decided they could work more effectively from a less hectic base than New York City. They saw Joye Cottage advertised in a Sotheby’s



catalog in 1984 and bought it five years later.

It's hardly a "cottage" at 20,000 square feet with its 60 rooms in four wings, including 14 bedrooms, several kitchens and dining rooms and 26 fireplaces. Joye Cottage is a (principally) Georgian Revival affair on a quiet, hoof-friendly dirt street in Aiken's equestrian district. Formerly known as the Whitney-Vanderbilt estate, it dates to the late 1800s and was a component of Aiken's famous Winter Colony. Wealthy northern families came to socialize and compete in horse racing, polo, squash, court tennis and

golf. The original, central section of Joye Cottage at one time was a boarding house run by Sarah Jane Joye. Financier William C. Whitney bought it in 1896 and engaged acclaimed New York architect George A. Freeman to expand it by some 4,000 square feet. The Whitneys would add even more. At one point, it had 29 bedrooms.

"We needed to make it more of a house-house, so we turned a lot of the bedrooms into public rooms," Smith said of its modern-day iteration. It had been vacant nine years and was in serious disrepair when Naifeh and Smith acquired it for half a million dollars. They've invested much more than that, making extensive immediate repairs and ongoing renovations.

The house is so rambling that musicians in private chambers can rehearse simultaneously as loudly as they need without disturbing one another.

Among its notable features is what's believed to be the

oldest swimming pool in South Carolina.

Almost from the time they moved in, they worried about its future after they passed on. Before they bought it, the property had been through several "near-death experiences," with speculators vying to acquire and relocate different sections of it hither and yon. Naifeh and Smith considered it an Aiken historical treasure and wished to preserve it. Hence the bequest to Juilliard.

The authors long have pursued personal artistic interests. Smith, a classically trained pianist, has an extensive background in choral performing and conducting. Naifeh is an avid painter and, though not a musician, a walking musical encyclopedia. "You can play five seconds of a piece, and he'll say, 'Mozart's 39th Symphony,'" Smith noted. "We share that love of music—which is one of the reasons Juilliard was the choice. Another is that we were looking for an institution we knew would be around in 50 years."

The awesome gift—Juilliard's largest bequest ever—is not just





from Naifeh and Smith; it's from Aiken. "We realized that if this retreat for Juilliard students was going to be successful long-term, it needed to have roots in the community," Smith explained. "It had to be something the community supported and felt an investment in—and something Juilliard felt a commitment to. It had to have roots at Juilliard, too."

Their original idea was to invite musicians to perform and relax for a week or two, to develop an alumni of people "who understood our vision of what we thought this place could be, who would be willing to come back and teach and work with younger students," Smith added. "Sandra and her initiative accelerated it with this Juilliard in Aiken Festival."

**O**f all the potential retreat locales in America, why did Juilliard partner with Aiken?

The Naifeh/Smith bequest obviously factored in, but there's more. In its own announcement of the festival, Juilliard stated that Aiken splendidly complements its mission. The conservatory strives to help aspiring musicians, dancers and actors "achieve the highest artistic standards and become leaders in their

professions" — and academics is only part of the formula. Juilliard seeks "to instill in them a sense of the artist's responsibility in the world outside the rehearsal room and the performance hall. The Juilliard in Aiken Festival puts Juilliard's mission into action."

The new festival, the school said, "celebrates the importance of arts education at a time when many school-based arts programs are under strain."

The 2009 festival received thumbs up all around. "Overwhelmingly positive," Field said, describing advance sell-out performances and support from city government and volunteers. "Just phenomenal," Smith affirmed, noting what an exceptional honor the city's been given. "We get a chance to experience some of the world's leading artists doing their thing. We're the only city they do this with. They could've partnered with Fresno or Santa Fe or Tahoe. This is an amenity that you just can't find in any other town in America."

The Juilliard students are "artists" worthy of Carnegie Hall, Smith said. "But in addition to getting a world-class performance by world-class artists, you also get the thrill of seeing it done live. Young people just light up as they discover onstage their potential within themselves. That's the special magic of it."

Naifeh said he and Smith want Juilliard's inheritance of Joye Cottage to continue a long-term community relationship. "When we are gone (which hopefully is no time soon), their coming down will have more meaning." ●



*Contributing Editor Daniel E. Harmon writes from his home in Spartanburg.*

*For more information about the 2010 Juilliard in Aiken Festival, visit the Web site at [juilliardinaiken.com](http://juilliardinaiken.com) or phone (803) 643-4776.*

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