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BENNETT SCHOOL MAGNET FOR MUSIC

By **ROBERT SHERMAN**, SEPT. 25, 1983

"I STARTED at the Bennett Conservatory of Music when I was about 10 and went there right through high school," recalled Peter Salaff, violinist of the renowned Cleveland Quartet, who returns to his hometown of Croton-on-Hudson for a special scholarship fund benefit concert Tuesday. "Charles Bennett was my first teacher, and he was really very inspirational. I wasn't the prodigy type - it took me quite a while to grow musically - but he was always very supportive and took a great deal of interest in what I was doing."

Taking a keen interest in all aspects of their students' development has become a hallmark of the faculty members through the 32 years of the conservatory's history. Teachers of all instruments and voice volunteer free theory classes to their private students and the conservatory offers the pupils ensemble performing opportunities at no additional charge.

About 40 or 50 adults from the community are using the instructional facilities, while at the other end of the age spectrum, preschoolers are formed into elementary percussion or piano classes; dance training is available to children 6 to 17 years old, and teenagers can take acting classes along with their music lessons. The modest Bennett catalogue says: "This brochure attempts to outline what the conservatory has to offer, but it cannot adequately convey the atmosphere of friendliness, informality, enthusiasm and dedication in which this instruction takes place. It can only imply some of the unique advantages to the student which such a school can offer - the chance to see and hear such a variety of artistic efforts, to take part in coordinated artistic projects, to know that one's own lesson is a small but significant part of a group effort to make life richer through the enjoyment and the disciplines of art."

"The story began a century ago in the wilds of western Canada," said Charles Bennett, chairman of the board of trustees. "My mother and father distinguished themselves there in the arts, especially my mother, who was a fine professional musician, and when we moved to Croton they helped us start a conservatory that would keep up the family memory."

"It still is a family operation," said his wife, Else Bennett, who has been director of the conservatory since 1974. "People seem very happy about being able to send their children to the same place where they themselves took music lessons. It hasn't really changed all that much either - there's a special, unpressured feeling people enjoy. We're not out to make money, we're out to do something for the community, and I think the community appreciates it."

Two more founding Bennetts continue their association with the conservatory they established more than three decades ago: Anne, who teaches guitar, and her husband, Boyd, who is Charles's brother and one of the more versatile musicians in the county. He is in charge of instruction on cello, double bass, horn, trumpet and trombone. The family continues to subsidize the conservatory through donations of instruments and equipment, not to mention time, and a family endowment keeps tuition within manageable levels.

"The conservatory has a charter from the Board of Regents of the State University," explained Charles Bennett, "so we are obliged - and we love - to give services to the community. One type of service is

playing concerts at hospitals and rest homes in the area; another is awarding scholarships, and a third is to introduce fine music to our community. What a splendid thing it is to bring top, world-class artists to our little village, as we'll be doing on Tuesday."

Peter Salaff, meanwhile, said he was looking forward with equal anticipation to his return visit. "My folks still live in Croton," he said, "so it's really like coming home. Actually, my whole family studied at the Bennett Conservatory, and in addition to my music, I took art lessons as well. I was very interested in drawing and painting, and a lot of my time was spent right there at the school. It was a wonderful experience."

At Tuesday's benefit recital, Mr. Salaff will join his faculty colleague at the Eastman School of Music, the noted pianist Barry Snyder, for a varied program of sonatas by Corelli, Beethoven and Faure, plus Penderecki's "Miniatures" for violin and piano. The starting time is 8 P.M. at the Croton-Harmon High School Auditorium, and tickets are \$8 (\$5 for students and the elderly). For information about the concert or the school, call the conservatory at 271-4825.

"We really are a very happy family here," Charles Bennett said, "and some great young teachers are coming along to carry the tradition forward."

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