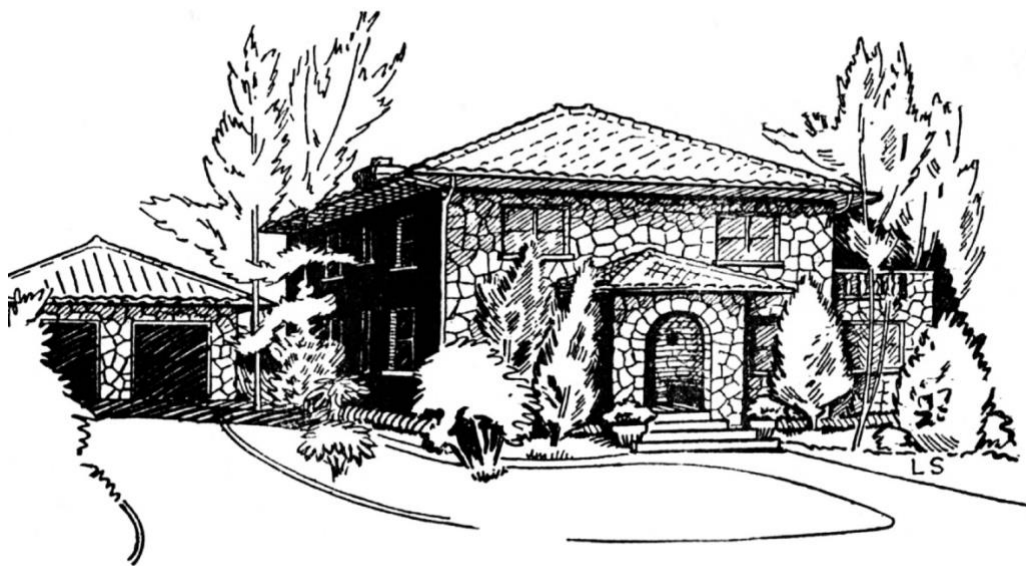


Celebrating 75 Years

The
BENNETT
CONSERVATORY
of **MUSIC**

B *Est.* 1950

MEMORIES
of
THE BENNETT CONSERVATORY



18 Van Wyck Street Croton-on-Hudson, NY10520

Barbara Bennett-Woodhouse
Law Professor
Wolfeboro, New Hampshire

I was 5 years old in 1950 and I remember going with my parents, Boyd and Anne, and my big brother Charlie to look at various potential locations for the Bennett Conservatory. 18 Van Wyck was ideal - walking distance from Croton schools and built of solid stone, with an upstairs apartment for my paternal grandfather Charles Henry Bennett. He would be moving to Croton from Detroit to be closer to his children and to help them found this music school.

One of my first teachers there was Stefan Kozakevich, the famous Baritone. I recall that my mother and I took joint singing lessons and we performed a duet of Gilbert and Sullivan's "Willow Tit Willow" at a Bennett Conservatory concert. It was great fun for me, although my mother was inexplicably nervous.

My studies of dance with Fanya Del Bourgo began at age 5 and lasted through high school. Fanya taught us "modern dance", which was then quite new. She encouraged fantasy and self-expression and we choreographed many original pieces for dance recitals. One that sticks in my mind was "The Flood" in which we put into movement our shared experience of a timeline the 1950s when the Croton River turned into a raging torrent, threatening houses and tearing up roads and bridges. Later in life, I taught child development. Looking back, I realized how important a role "The Flood" had played in our young lives, allowing us to express our hopes and fears and to process a shared traumatic event.

Art classes taught by Winnie Lubell were another favorite group class of mine. The garage at 18 Van Wyck had been fitted up as an art studio and we were introduced to many different mediums of artistic expression. I loved that class partly because it included young people of all ages.

As a teen, I studied Ballet in addition to modern dance. Our teacher, Val Butignol, had been recruited by my Uncle Gene Hill who was passionate about ballet. Val was a classically trained perfectionist. I soon realized that I did not have the body of a prima ballerina. Still, the class instilled in me an understanding of the rigors of classical ballet. I recall Val took us to meet his fellow soloists at City Center Ballet including Jacques D'Ambrois.

I must confess that I had a hard time sticking with any particular musical instrument. I'm sure my parents were frustrated but didn't show it. My father had started me on cello as a very young child, using a viola strung backward. I loved it but hated practicing. After many forays into various instruments, I finally got serious enough about flute to be able to play in the High School orchestra. My flute teacher was the unbelievably patient and tolerant Byron Kirkpatrick, a member of the West Point band.

During my teen years, the early 1960s, the Bennett Conservatory played a big role in the development of the Croton Shakespeare Festival. My mother was one of the three founding mothers and my father arranged period music for many of the plays. For one play in which I was cast in the non-speaking role of "harpist" he created a replica of an ancient Egyptian harp out of bits and pieces of cellos and guitars. And he composed a melody using an authentic ancient scale.

My memories of the Bennett Conservatory are, of course, intertwined with memories of my family life. I spent many afternoons there after school drinking tea and doing homework. My brother and I used to annoy our uncle by locking the bathroom door and climbing out the bathroom window. The Conservatory functioned as the “ancestral home” where all the Bennett siblings, spouses, children and grandchildren gathered for holidays. Boyd and Cedric had contrived to divide the long living room into two studios. The partition was removed on holidays just as it continues to be removed for concerts. With my grandfather at the head of the table, we gathered for Thanksgiving and Christmas and every female brought a dish. The Bennett family was an elastic concept and many fellow musicians and even ex-spouses were regulars.

These are my childhood memories. I also did a stint at age 21 running the Conservatory office. Later, after I had married and moved back to Croton, my children studied and played in the same environment I had enjoyed as a child. They will have memories of their own.

Charles H. Bennett, Chairman of the Board

Physicist

Croton-on-Hudson

My sister and I were 5 and 7 years old when the Bennett Conservatory of Music was founded in 1950 by three musician siblings, our father Boyd, his sister Mercedes and their brother Charles Cedric Bennett. My third-grade classmate Cathy Reynolds was the first student, taking piano lessons with Mercedes. I studied with Mercedes too, but reluctantly, because music lessons were compulsory for Bennett children. Too bad Mercedes didn't live to see me resume piano lessons enthusiastically as an adult.

The majestic stone building at 18 Van Wyck St. required many alterations. Its dining room became a convivial waiting room, and the adjacent kitchen had all the plumbing and appliances removed to make a studio quiet enough for our mother Anne to teach guitar, one of the most popular instruments during folk music's heyday, insulated by the waiting room from the louder instruments in other studios. The Bennetts also crafted a slightly sound-proof partition, still in use, to divide the former big living room into two separate teaching studios. In about 15 minutes it could be disassembled to allow the whole space to be used for student and faculty recitals, then reassembled afterwards. The most radical alteration was a basement dance studio with a hardwood floor, a mirror at one end, and a barre along the wall, all of which would have been to no avail had the Bennetts not found a tiny dance teacher, the indomitable Fanya Del Bourgo, who taught modern dance to generations of pre-adolescents still young enough not to hit their heads on the basement ceiling. Behind the mirror lies a mysterious room I still occasionally visit, full of abandoned musical instruments and spider webs. After Fanya retired the dance studio was repurposed for even smaller students in the Music Together program.

In its early decades the Conservatory hosted other cultural activities, especially shows by Croton's numerous talented artists and photographers. Such shows, as well as the Conservatory larger recitals, now usually take place in more spacious venues like the Unitarian Fellowship and the Croton Free Library, but in those days the Library was housed in a single room in the Municipal Building. Even though only a few Bennett alumni became musicians themselves, learning to perform before an audience has always been an important element of the

Conservatory's philosophy, sometimes causing friction with parents of shy children who just wanted to learn to play, not perform.

During our teen years, the early 1960s, the Bennett Conservatory played a big role in the development of the Croton Shakespeare Festival. Our mother was one of the three founding mothers and our father arranged period music for many of the plays. For one play in which Barbara was cast in the non-speaking role of "harpist" he created a replica of an ancient Egyptian harp out of bits and pieces of cellos and guitar and composed a melody using an authentic ancient scale.

After the founding siblings' death, Charles Cedric's widow Else Bennett continued as the school's director for over 30 years, and was honored at her retirement in 2015 by mayoral proclamation, to be succeeded by Jane Parkhouse. Under Jane's leadership, with a hiatus during the COVID pandemic during which group activities were suspended and lessons and recitals conducted by Zoom, the Conservatory launched a series of small free community events including lectures on the physics of music, West African music, musical diplomacy during the Cold War, and most recently an annual Maypole Dance on the Conservatory's front lawn. The Conservatory's most distinguished alumnus, Cedric's star student from the 1950's Peter Salaff, became a founding member of the Cleveland Quartet and returned to teach a master class in 2017. One of our largest events was the Queer Urban Orchestra's full-orchestra performance at the high school of Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf", narrated for children by Conservatory board member Alex Dyer.

Meryl Marcus

Academic Administrator/Editor

Former BCM board member

Croton-on-Hudson

In 1950 my grandmother Lillian Bennett Strom joined with three of her siblings, Boyd, Cedric, and Mercedes, to found the Bennett Conservatory of Music. Lillian was married to the Croton artist Nils Strom, who gave art lessons in their cottage on what is now Glengary Lane. Lillian gave art lessons in the basement of the Conservatory (later Fanya's dance studio) in the early years. The logo drawings of the Conservatory and of the flute player, seen on the front of this booklet, were drawn by Lillian.

Lillian was an accomplished musician and artist. In the 1920s, she performed with an all-female jazz band in Detroit, and then she received a scholarship to study art in Europe. While in Europe she married (briefly) a fellow student, Michael Auer, whose son from his next marriage is the concert pianist Edward Auer. When Lillian returned to the U.S., still a Canadian citizen, she enrolled in the Art Student League in NYC where she met and soon married the Swedish artist Nils Strom, who was studying there with George Grosz. My mother Karin was their only child, and she inherited her parents' talents in music and art. As a child in NYC, she spent many happy hours with her Bennett aunts and uncles. They taught her songs that she later taught to my four siblings and me when we were young. There was lots of singing (and piano lessons) in our home.

Nils Strom was a talented artist, working in watercolors, pen-and-ink, sculpture, and more. His caricatures of public figures appeared in mainstream and political/activist periodicals in the 1930s-40s. He also worked briefly as an artist for Walt Disney in California in the late 1930s, but he was fired for union organizing activities and they returned to New York. In the 1940s, Nils, Lillian, and my mother Karin moved to Croton, where Boyd, Anne, Charlie, and Barbara were already living. They built (with their own hands, I'm told) a cottage in the woods off Glengary Road, and Nils began giving art classes to local children. Over the years, every inch of wall space in the cottage was covered with his students' murals. He transported his art students (including me) to and from his cottage in an ancient Jeep. The back of the Jeep was completely open and we held on for dear life to keep from bouncing out onto the road. We all loved those Jeep rides.

My grandmother Lillian was active in the local Democratic party. In 1960 she met Eleanor Roosevelt and presented her with the original pen-and-ink caricature of FDR that Nils had drawn for the political magazine *Common Sense* in 1939. A few years ago, I discovered that this original artwork resides in the archives of the FDR Presidential Library & Museum in Hyde Park. The archivists were happy to learn about Nils and Lillian, and they invited me to visit and view his artwork in the archives, normally open only to researchers.

On the other side of the country, in the 1950s, Emma Chambers Bartlett – the sister of Lucinda (Lulu) Chambers Bennett, who was the mother of the Bennett founders and also a musician – had opened a music conservatory near Los Angeles. (Lulu's portrait hangs prominently at the Bennett Conservatory, as all students and their parents will recall.) When I was very young, we moved to California for a few years while my father Neal taught piano at Aunt Emma's music school. Moving forward to our return to Croton (via Brooklyn), I began music lessons at the Bennett at the age of 12. Voice lessons with opera singers Mary O'Hare and Valerie Lundberg (who sang in the Metropolitan Opera Chorus at that time); flute lessons with Byron Kirkpatrick (always in his West Point Army Band uniform); and guitar with my Uncle Boyd who made me laugh constantly with his jokes and puns. Boyd also taught cello to my grandfather Nils in their later years. Sadly, Lillian had died in 1966, four years after Mercedes.

After graduating from Croton-Harmon High School, I went off to SUNY with a major in music. Although I didn't pursue a career in music, I've sung with many choral groups, including the choir of the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in NYC, and with Pete Seeger and the Walkabout Clearwater Chorus. Several of my siblings studied music, and one of my nieces (Julia Marcus) studied vocal performance at Carnegie Mellon and is now a professional singer. The love of music in our family – and the musical skill – has been passed down through generations of Bennett descendants.

Peter Salaff

*Violinist with the Cleveland Quartet
Cleveland, Ohio*

My lessons with Cedric were so inspiring. I learned so much from him, not only about playing the violin, but also most importantly, about the beauty of music! I was also so inspired by hearing Cedric, Boyd and Mercedes performing! The Bennett Conservatory has been a very important part of my life.

Cornelia Cotton, Board Member

Croton-on-Hudson, New York

Written for Bennett Talk in 2019 (TBC) and published in The Croton Gazette in February 2022.

I am not a historian like the late Jane Northshield, who could prove everything she said or wrote. I am a writer who likes to tell stories. I am so glad Charlie Bennett, the son of founders Boyd and his wife Anne Bennett, is not here to correct me from the floor.

As an impecunious young mother of three I was looking for part-time work when I saw an ad in the *Croton-Cortlandt News*. The man who answered the phone was Gene Hill, then the director of the Bennett – an oboist, teacher, and a member of the fireman’s marching band, the Concordia Band. A sweet man but not a great administrator.

When bills arrived, he threw them into a drawer. Invoices to parents were irregular, and piles of newspapers had to be cut up and pasted into a scrap book. His getups at recitals were memorable – he wore a Spanish tsarape and black patent leather slippers.

Gene was married to one of the Bennett siblings, Mercedes, a pianist. To my regret I had never met her or heard her play. The year when I worked in the office, she was in a nursing home and in a sanatorium. When she came home, she stayed in bed, and soon died. Shortly thereafter Gene died and revealed himself as a man of secrets. It turned out that he had a whole other family in Ossining that nobody had known of.

The Bennett family came from Saskatchewan, Canada and settled first in Detroit. The father was a successful banker, now retired, who bought the building at 18 Van Wyck Street and supported the Conservatory financially. The mother was a professional musician who raised her children to also become thoroughly trained classical musicians.

The Bennett opened in 1950 with siblings Mercedes as the piano teacher, Boyd on cello and French horn, and Cedric on the violin. Their sister Lillian, at one time, had an all-girls band, but she taught art together with her husband, Nils Strom. Sister Eleanor was a writer and poet who lived in Portland, Oregon. In time, Fae, Cedric’s wife taught viola, and Anne Bennett, Boyd’s wife, taught classical guitar.

During Mercedes’ illness and after her death, piano was taught by Neal Marcus, who had married into the Bennett family; by Charlotte Heller, and by the glamorous, tempestuous Turkish pianist, Refika Elibay, who wore gold-embroidered outfits.

Two years after its founding the Bennett Conservatory had become a tremendous success. The faculty had been expanded to a mind -boggling size, and courses offered exceeded those of many more famous schools. To my surprise, I found a whole lot of people on the faculty roster of whom I never knew that they had any connection to the Bennett.

From my perch in the office, I met most of the faculty and students, many of whom remained life-long friends. Boyd, although he had a thorough classical training, loved popular music. Our [Cornelia and William Cotton’s] daughter Eve, studied cello with him. After her first lesson she

proudly played us what she had learned: the commercial jingle, “Mr. Clean, Mr. Clean, Mr. Clean.”

Boyd loved to reminisce about the golden period in his life when he played in the orchestra pits of silent movie houses. It was easy. It was fun, and he loved the camaraderie of the musicians. He told endless jokes – called the “6-year old jokes,” making him a great favorite with the kids. He also took his instruments and gave talks and demonstrations at the Croton Community Nursery school, introducing the littlest kids to the joy of music. It was Boyd who attached a sign to the wall in the rehearsal room lettered “suggestion box” – but he mounted the box right under the ceiling. His wife Anne was more earnest. She wrote an interesting booklet for parents about music lessons. The flamboyant Fanya Del Bourgo who taught dance for over thirty years loved to recall her youth in the Yiddish art scene on the Lower East Side. She was a great inspiration to generations of little girls in tutus as well as to grown women.

Evelyn Modoi Kleinman taught pre-instrument classes to little children. So warm-hearted, so dear was her love for these children, and so exciting the experience, that most of the little ones then signed up for regular classes.

During a number of years, Cedric, the youngest of the Bennett siblings, moved to California and traveled abroad. In his absence Joseph Palermo, a wonderful musician, became the main violin teacher. When our eldest daughter, Amy told us that Mr. Palermo always wore trousers with a tiny hounds-tooth pattern, that he admonished her with “just a hair” – and that he habitually would say, “It’s a bit stuffy here,” and would open a window, we didn’t pay much attention. When our youngest daughter Peggy took violin lessons with him, she told us the same stories. But it was only when my late husband, Bill, started to study with Mr. Palermo that what our children had told us turned out to be the truth. Mr. Palermo habitually wore trousers with a tiny hounds-tooth design. He would say, “Just a hair,” and “it’s a bit stuffy here,” and would open a window. When our cat lost one of his moustache hairs, Amy suggested we give it to Mr. Palermo with the words, “Just a hair!” but we never did. We loved Mr. Palermo.

Eventually, Cedric returned, bringing his new wife Else with him, whom he had met in Copenhagen. She became the new director. Of all the Bennetts, he was the most erudite.

He knew everything about music and music history, literature, philosophy, and a whole lot more. If you ask, “Is it possible for an adult who had no training as a child to learn to play the violin?” the answer was “Yes, if your teacher is Cedric.”

He was devoted to his students, but he could also be sarcastic, hurting people’s feelings. His irreverent style could surface at inappropriate moments, like at a student recital where an analysis of a Bach partita would be followed by an anecdote about a nudist colony. At a recital at a Black church in Ossining, after the preacher had inveighed against the evils of Times Square, Cedric was heard to exclaim that this was his most favorite place. He also told about the composer Handel who “practiced on a spinster in the attic.” Unfazed by these faux pas, the entire congregation thanked all of us(?) and shook hands with everybody. Cedric founded an adult chamber music group which met every week and was tailored to whoever showed up.

By 1976, a scholarship fund had been set up. Now, in addition to student and faculty recitals, there were concerts to raise money for this new fund by outstanding performers and ensembles.

The Bennetts' wide-ranging network of family, students, teachers, and lovers, gave them access to such attractions as Peter Salaff, Edward Auer, Beveridge Webster, the Cleveland and Laurentian String Quartets, and others.

The contributions made by the Bennett Conservatory to our community are many and go far beyond those of a music school. It was a hub of artistic activity. At a time when painters had no opportunity to bring their work to the attention of the public, the Bennett hosted annual art shows. Long before George Kelly started the Artists of Northern Westchester or the Croton Council on the Arts came into being, the Conservatory annually showed work by Croton artists – on rickety easels, music stands, on top of pianos, and on the walls.

Another very important historical contribution by the Bennett Conservatory to our village life was the healing power of the arts in a badly divided population, a legacy of political strife that had driven apart Croton's society since the Russian Revolution. Not only were there Stalinists, Trotskyists, anarchists, socialists, liberals and others not on speaking terms with each other, but the larger group of Democrats and Republicans who made up the bulk of the population, often viewing their neighbors with suspicion. Through the joy of art, in Schiller's words, "All men became brothers." At least at 18 Van Wyck Street.

When you look through the programs of students and student recitals, you get a marvelous sense of the generations following each other. I'm going to list the names of some of the students – most of their parents are probably no longer alive, but the Bennett students who were children then are older adults now: Sally Stevenson, Jansi Meltzer, Julia and Philip Oldenburg, Natalie and Roxanne Seitz, Madeline Kaplan, Muffy North, Wendy Bretz, Jan Coleman, Wendy Stark, Mary Toey, Jessica Roddy, Meryl and Claudia Marcus, Tommy Keppler, Peter Kaufman, Evan Ashkin, Brice Moss, James Rossin, Tim Rondthaler, Michael and Nance Shatzkin, Arnold Rosenblatt, Deane Rynerson, Seth Davis, Valerie Salat, David Karpoff, Eleanor Goldstein, Charlie and Barbara Bennett, Donna Reynolds, Scott Seldin, Nancy Kleinman, Elizabeth Berliner, Susan Dichter, Sandy Blazer, Eleanor Gingold, Ilse Bluestein, Seth Kunin.

The Bennett Conservatory was the one place where the children of all different families went to learn about music and art and beauty and how to be a civilized person in this world. They had the best models, and they still do.

Peggy Cotton Hurley

Refashions & upcycles used denim apparel

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New Paltz, NY

I'm the youngest child from a musical family – my father a violinist, my mother a singer and pianist, my sister Amy a violinist and violist, and my sister Eve a cellist. They all studied at the Bennett Conservatory of Music. In my parents' desire to add me to the musical group, they made me study the violin at the Bennett School. I was around 8 and asked to take guitar lessons instead (because the Beatles were everything to me), but that was not to be. I think I took violin lessons for one or maybe two years – I wasn't interested in it and didn't enjoy the lessons (at no fault to my teacher Mr. Palermo). Eventually it became clear that I would not be joining the family musical group, and thankfully the music lessons ended.

When I grew up, got married and had children, my first-born son Billy was always tinkering on our piano and showed a natural interest in playing it, so my parents offered to enroll him at the Bennett School. Once a week, with my new baby son Tim in tow, I'd take him to his lessons. My father, Bill Cotton, who was still studying at Bennett and was now retired, would meet me at the school to spend time with us while Billy had his lesson. Sometimes I'd give my father a haircut in the Bennett driveway while we were waiting . . . wafts of his silver hair would blow along Van Wyck Street. Sometimes we would hang out in the Bennett waiting room. This was time I'll always cherish – just me and my father shooting the breeze.

In July 1992 my father died suddenly after spending a week of playing chamber music at an art center in Vermont. It was a great shock, and grappling to accept the loss, I numbly went about my responsibilities as a mother and wife, all the while feeling like I wasn't really there. But staying on track, I took Billy to his piano lesson at Bennett, and when I opened that heavy front door, Charles met me there and guided me into the waiting room. There – on the chair my father always sat in while waiting for his lesson – was a sign that Charles had written: "This seat reserved for Bill Cotton." I looked at Charles, and with tears in our eyes, we acknowledged the tremendous loss of his friend, my father. I'll never forget that moment as long as I live. The experiences at the Bennett School wove itself into the fabric of all of our lives. The sounds, the smells, the voices of that school. Fanya teaching dance in the basement. Boyd's comedic picture on the wall of a person playing an instrument with a strange expression and the caption said something like, "Who played that B flat?" The recitals. The tiny little office where my mother once worked as a secretary. Anne Bennett bustling around. Else Bennett's kind eyes and lovely voice.

So, cozy. Thank you, Bennett School, for providing such a memorable place for us.

Louis Pelosi

Composer

Croton-on-Hudson, New York

I have been servicing all of the pianos at the Bennett Conservatory since 1989.

On my first appointment over 35 years ago I raised the Chickering grand to concert pitch. I have kept all records of work done on the various instruments there since that time. Cedric Charles and Else were then in charge. I especially remember fondly their coming to my house to attend one of the art exhibitions/concerts my late wife Rosemarie and I would put on annually. Charles was then in failing health but genteel as always. Else herself was a great source of strength to me after my own beloved spouse died some years later.

Seth Davis

Lawyer

BCM board member 2005-2015

Bethel, Connecticut

The Bennett Conservatory was an integral and vital center of my education and my formative years. As opposed to the public school system, the Conservatory was consistently loving, inspiring, challenging, nurturing, unconventional, bohemian, and fun. It may have been unorthodox, but the number of talented musicians it produced underscores the fact that the Conservatory fostered true love of music and musicianship.

How often I have wished to be transported back in time to the Conservatory of my youth. To walk up those stone steps and through that front door and hear the glorious cacophony coming from the various studios—pianists, guitarists, maybe a dozen preschoolers tootling their recorders, and from that first door on your left there could be practically anything—French horn, cello, accordion, God only knows. From downstairs would come the thunderous footfalls of hordes of young dancers. And you’d better watch it if you were near the top of the stairs when class ended and they came charging up those stairs to be taken home.

Behind all of this was the spectacular faculty, marvelous in no small part because they were mostly the Bennetts themselves. There was Mercedes, the marvelous pianist, ever full of love for students, as well as for the music she played. Gene Hill, her oboist husband, outwardly gruff but a truly loving soul, and a great friend to young people. Anne, the guitarist, highly sought after by the hordes of would-be Elvises that abounded in the late 50s. But for me, above all, there was Boyd, my own particular guru, my teacher for something like ten years.

When Boyd left us I was honored to be asked to speak at his memorial. I think enough time has now passed for me to repeat some of that speech now. Boyd taught me cello, joke telling, and pipe smoking. Since then I have happily given up the pipes, and unfortunately my cello is gone, but the humor remains. More importantly, his love of life and of music will live in me forever.

I started with a course for younger kids called Exploration of Instruments. A better title would have been Exploration of Bennetts. Each week we would be introduced to a different instrument by a different faculty member. But after I met Boyd and touched a cello for the first time that was it for me. I’m still not sure if it was the love of the instrument or the fascination with Boyd, but I was hooked. The fascination continued with private lessons, made even more interesting by his unique method. Among other things, Boyd would prepare pieces to play with made up names of composers. Like “This Old House” by Frank Lloyd Wright. Or “The Sailor’s Hornpipe” by Mel de Mer. There was the time a young Boyd protégé sat down at a recital and announced “I Want to Be Happy” by Cotton Mather. (Adults stifling laughter was an important part of those concerts). And this continued to the highest levels. The Bach suites for cello, as taught by Boyd, contained movements such as “Sarah Band-Aid,” “Bouree for Our Side,” and “Gigue”—pronounced “Jig-you-ee.”

But through all that laughter he taught excellent musicianship, and a special, warm tone. Even more fun than the private lessons were the special ensembles Boyd put together, most notably the “Soup Group,” namesake of an RCAF group Boyd had played with that consisted of

whoever was available—throw all the instruments into a pot, boil them, and you’d get soup. I recall Bennett Soup Groups—we always rehearsed in the garage—with cellos, flutes, trumpets, drums, guitars, accordions, you name it. I think Boyd mainly picked kids who would enjoy it. I can’t recall if we were ever permitted to perform in public but it was a lot of fun.

And those recitals. A wonderful experience, because you learned very early that performing in front of an audience was something you could do, and something important to do. Gene was usually the emcee, and his grave intonation of “Seth Davis, cello solo” would at first inspire some fear, but ultimately became part of the routine, and echoes in my mind to this day, when I am introduced before a professional or community group. I learned to be as comfortable and confident in adult settings as I was in front of that grand piano on Van Wyck Street.

And everybody performed. The youngest were as warmly received as the more accomplished students. It might have scary at first, but it was fun.

There were also faculty concerts in those days, generally in the evening, and they were memorable. I can remember trios, quartets, Anne playing Fernando Sor (after whom she and Boyd later named their boat), and Mercedes telling a story about an early teacher of hers who hated Mozart. (THAT is truly an obstacle to overcome!). The faculty were not just teachers—they were performers. For a young student it was glorious.

There is a memory, an ear worm of sorts, that is constantly with me. At Christmas time there would be a special concert and each student played a different Christmas song—no repetitions. (Except the year that the recorder group played “Jolly Old St. Nicholas” just before I did—they didn’t get the memo and I was furious). I can remember Mercedes working on “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear” with a young student who had trouble with one particular phrase. And Mercedes had them repeat it over and over, singing along, in her honeyed voice, “That glorious song of old...”. The sound came through the door of the studio, and I heard over and over “That glorious song of old.” And so it stayed with me. “That glorious song of old” is for me, and ever will be, the Bennett Conservatory. And I will never be able—or want—to get it out of my head.

Nance Shatzkin

Founder, Shatzkin Systems, Inc.

Current Board Member, Bennett Conservatory

New York City

Pushing open the heavy wooden door to hear the sounds of piano and violin lessons, teachers counting 1,2,3,4 and expressing support for students – I can hear it all in my mind like it was yesterday. Walking into the waiting room with its big table, there might be strains of guitar lessons from Anne’s little classroom. And there was always someone to say hello to – others doing homework at the big table or sitting quietly reading a book.

Dance classes were down the steep stairs to the basement. There we immediately switched into student mode! Change into leotards and slippers and stand at the barre ready to go to work. Our classes with Fanya followed a pattern: barre work, several passes down the floor doing steps called out for us, and finally, improvisation: each of us in turn freely dancing to music of our

choice or Fanya's, able to show off and drift into our imagination of fine modern dance. We patiently watched each other, anxiously awaiting our turn. It never lost its magic!

Others grew taller and worried for the low ceilings but I never had that issue!

Sometime around 1960 we were invited to the high school to participate in A Midsummer Night's Dream – we little ones – maybe age 7-8 – were the fairies in a Drama Club production. It was exciting to hang out with the big kids, come to dress rehearsal the night before the show and be in the dressing room below the stage until it was our time to enter.

And in 1963 there were many meetings of Anne Bennett and my mom, Elky Shatzkin (along with Laura Berliner), to organize the Croton Shakespeare Festival with Fred Blais, the English teacher and Drama Club coach. Fred felt the best way for students to learn Shakespeare was to perform it, and he'd found very willing supporters for the idea in Anne, Elky and Laura!

The Conservatory and the Shakespeare Festival were tight knit from then on. No opportunity for musicians was missed and there were now opportunities for performance beyond school recitals.

I studied with Fanya for years – and even when juvenile arthritis limited my ability, I came to class and watched, thoroughly engaged even from the sideline. Fanya was a powerhouse, with total command of her record collection and placing that needle in just the right spot on the record for the musical piece she wanted!

Years later, Boyd's brother Cedric returned to Croton and joined the faculty at the Conservatory. Cedric's wife, Else, took over the office management responsibilities and kept the school going even after Cedric's passing. As Else aged some of us worried how the school would continue without a Bennett family member to lead the charge. By now, back in Croton with my own children, I was serving on the Board and hoping for an answer.

Enter Jane Parkhouse, who arrived to a diminished enrollment in a more competitive environment. Having been the only music school in the area for several decades, Bennett now had competition from other schools in the Village. But Bennett had 'secret sauce', including a history of recital and performance experience and its magical building – Jane was able to build back the offerings and the student body to what has become a healthy and thriving Conservatory, happily celebrating its 75th anniversary.

Stacy Labriola

Guitar teacher

Garrison, New York

Congrats on the 75th anniversary!

The overall memory of Bennett Conservatory is lovely. The first time we visited to sign Malinda (Lindy) up for violin I loved the homey vibe, the smell of coffee, meeting Jane and Else, the hardwood floors and the sounds of music lessons coming from the two front rooms. Malinda learned a lot from Jane! I was happy to also teach some kids on guitar and also do a pre-K music class. My own kids (Malinda & Sara) have memories of sitting in the kitchen area doing their homework and waiting for me to finish teaching. They didn't mind as they had each other and

they usually had another child to visit with. All in all, it was a good memory for all of us. We'd usually go out for some soup at the Italian restaurant in town not too far from The Bennett.

Laura Ravotti

Piano and brass teacher

Cortlandt Manor, New York

I was introduced to Else when I first moved to Croton, 24 years ago, by flute teacher Lisa Morsberger. I mainly taught piano and had one French horn student, and one trumpet student, Sarah Marshall, and I am friends with her mother to this day. My fondest memory is of faculty member Douglas Townsend, who taught composition, theory and piano. He was a wonderful man and taught me a lot about composition and pedagogy. I performed his works at several concerts in New York City and recorded Christmas Carols for four hand piano. He passed away years ago; I miss him and his friendship. I also remember two other fine colleagues, Lenna Andrews (cello) and Refika Elibay (piano).

Sylvia Lustig

Engineer

Arlington, Massachusetts

It's great to hear that the Bennett is celebrating its 75th anniversary. It's such a wonderful Croton institution. I am a past student and wanted to share some memories:

I began playing the violin in 2000 (age 4) in the CET strings program and soon thereafter at the Bennett Conservatory in a group lesson with Jane Parkhouse. I still remember performing "Hoe Down" at Bennett recitals - a song that involved some choreography as well as playing our instruments! I took private lessons with Jane and performed at the Bennett until high school, when she sent me on my way to learn from a new teacher. Jane was such a kind, caring, and talented teacher. And she must have one of the largest sticker collections around, so you always felt accomplished when you mastered a scale, etude, or new piece. I continued playing violin through college in the Tufts Symphony Orchestra, and nearly 25 years after I picked up that first tiny (1/4 size) violin, I still play and perform in a string quartet in Boston. Classical music ensembles have been a constant in my life, allowing me to meet new people, travel to new places, and push myself to work hard at something that isn't school or my career. And it all started at the Bennett and with Jane Parkhouse! Congratulations to the Bennett Conservatory and thank you for all you have done for the Croton music community!

Gary Ashkin

Santa Fe, New Mexico

As I was planning to attend my 50th Croton-Harmon High School reunion this summer (*July 2024*), the thought struck me to check out a map of Croton. The Bennett Conservatory of Music immediately caught my eye. It's still there!

I am sixty-eight, I have played some kind of instrument my whole life and played in numerous bands. I started my journey with you! First, I took piano lessons with Mrs. Posada, I think that was her name. I hated it. "Cut your nails" was at the top of every assignment. Still, despite myself I did learn to read music poorly and get a basic sense of music fundamentals. I quit piano and took up guitar. Anne Bennett was my teacher. She taught me the joy of playing. I will always be grateful to her for that. She, like every other music teacher gave me assignments. I rarely did them. Never once did she shame me, not once! Instead, we would take up our guitars, get out what I was supposed to practice and play and sing together for my 30-minute lesson. I loved it! No guilt fun!

Besides a bit of piano and guitar I now also play fiddle, banjo and mandolin.
It all started there.

David Beldock
San Diego, California

I'm a musician/teacher living San Diego. I recently received an email from Gary Ashkin saying that you guys are still teaching music. I was a student of Anne Bennett's many years ago. She was a wonderful teacher and a very kind person. I remember her fondly, smoking Chesterfields and wearing desert boots. She was very cool! I'm thankful to her for turning me on to guitar/music and to you guys for continuing to do that for people, kids especially.

Thanks for doing good stuff in the world.

Refika Elibay
Pianist
Staten Island, New York

I, in plain words, kept coming to teach at the Bennett Conservatory year after year for 38 years! I will give you 3 basic reasons for my dedication.

1. It gave me a chance to leave NYC and to be with nature
2. Else, besides being the director became my longtime friend. She supplied me with interesting students and also asked me to accompany Jane's violin students year after year which I always welcomed.
3. Last but not least I looked forward to Tuesdays and working with everyone that I enjoyed so much.

Lenna Darbin Andrews
Music teacher
Albany, New York

Whenever I think of the Bennett Conservatory, a smile comes to my face and my heart warms. I was on faculty there from 1998 - 2011, teaching voice, piano, 'cello, and early childhood classes in piano. Else Bennett and I had many conversations lasting into the evenings about music, education and society at large. Else's faith and devotion to all of these topics was inspiring. She

was completely dedicated to the vision that her husband, Charles, and his siblings set in motion decades earlier: to provide quality music lessons in their community. Stepping into the building was like participating in history, past, present and future.

Jan Aiello

Artist

Croton-on-Hudson

My Memories of Being a Student with Charles Cedric...

I was an adult violin student, looking for a way to get to know people in my new town of Croton-on-Hudson. Once I started lessons with Charles, my life in this tree-lined village began. He and Else introduced me to the painters at the Unitarian Fellowship, and our friendship expanded to include neighbors, artists, and musicians.

We played quartets and chamber music on Thursday nights. We played recitals on Sundays, and Spring recitals at the high school. At times I felt overwhelmed and over extended, but since those days are in my rear-view mirror, I try to re-invent them with friends. It's not easy. Those days, that season of friendship ignited by music, were a rare celebration of life.

Else Bennett was the social organizer who created the Ladies' Spring Lunch—always during an unexpected cold snap in late Spring—typical of Hudson Valley weather! Instead of salads and bright, light foods, we tucked into casseroles of potatoes and cheese.

Lessons with Charles were always a big learning event. He focused on musicality and technique. His remarks stayed in the mind for their cutting originality. I was working hard on a very vigorous piece, struggling with the intonation of the high notes, when he exclaimed, "That note exists on your violin, my dear. I suggest you FIND IT!" I never did.

We talked about art, culture, politics, music—of course—and movie stars. Sometimes we got to perform together at churches or the Danish Home. Once or twice, I got to play the big viola, his 17-inch behemoth he called The Stallion. It had a remarkable sound, but I had to shift a half a position just to reach my 4th finger in first position! Still, the sound was heavenly.

Missing Charles is more like missing a season, or a chapter in your life. The chamber music evenings, the lessons, the recitals—all gone for me. Even though other teachers have taken up the mantle, and I did very good work with Yvette, Charles personified the Bennett school for me. I miss all of it.

Kathleen Beller

Actor

Croton-on-Hudson

Boyd and Anne were dear friends of my family and I took ballet lessons with Fanya in the basement (chilly!) and guitar lessons with Anne (she was *very* patient with me). Although I never became a dancer nor a musician, one small aspect has stayed with me: there were always Graham Crackers in the waiting room and I am transported back there every time I eat one, smell one or just see a box of them on the grocery store shelf.

Croton is so very lucky to have been chosen by them.

Jonathan Karpoff

Corporate Software Analyst. Retired.

Croton-on-Hudson

I attended the Bennett from age 9 into college studying violin with Ms. Sophia, Mr. Palermo and later with Charles the elder. I would walk across the Village once a week for lessons carrying my violin. I knew Boyd and Anne as well as Gene Hill (funny but could be just a tiny scary with intensity) and Neal Marcus. I never really knew Mercedes. I remember her, but didn't know her.

Of course, I also worked with Anne for years in the Shakespeare Festival and played Incidental music one season with Charles the younger--I can still play you that music.

I have so many physical memories of the Bennett from its smell to the light and the sounds to the parlors with the double doors.

Although I enjoyed my private lessons, I think my favorite times were playing in small ensembles with Boyd. In fact, small ensemble playing is still by far my favorite way of playing music, whether it is playing a Haydn quartet or in a bluegrass string band.

While Mr. Palermo was a fantastic teacher of technique and interpretation, Boyd was immensely fun (if you survived the puns) and had a way of introducing students to the pure joy of playing.

For a while we had a quartet at the Bennett with me and Kitty Cowan on violins, David d'Heurle on cello and Mr. Palermo on viola. What was the most fun was us switching off 1st and 2nd violin and even viola. I loved playing the viola!

I had such a strange, unique, rich and wonderful childhood here in Croton. The Bennett. The Shakespeare Festival. Lee Hays (Seeger, Arlo, Dave Bromberg) and the Clearwater. City concerts and museums. Where else in the world? And at its center for 12 years were the Bennett's and the Bennett.

I can hear Neal playing piano, Boyd cello and Anne guitar softly through the plaster walls. I can still smell the layers of wood, varnish, wax and dust. Feel the coolness and humidity. The stillness. It is still with me; it is within me and always will be.

My only regret? I really should have practiced more.

David Bluestein

Electrician

Croton-on-Hudson

I took guitar lessons with (Charlie's mother) Anne at "The Bennett" for a few years starting in 1952 when I was 6 years old. It was just down the street from the Croton Community Nursery

School, which I had attended a couple of years earlier. I loved music, but I was rebellious and not a good student. Anne was a good teacher, patient and kind. I'll always love her and Boyd, "The Bennett", Charlie, and Barbara. Kindness and intelligence runs in their family... the good traits live on.

Nina Davis-Millis

Director of Community Engagement and Music Librarian, MIT Libraries (retired)
East Weymouth, MA

My family moved to Croton in the summer of 1955, when I was about a year and a half old; Boyd and Anne Bennett were among the first friends my parents made here, and they remained close friends for the rest of their lives. Clearly this means I missed the early years of the Conservatory's history. It also means that the Bennetts have always been part of my world - I simply can't imagine my life without them, and to be honest I wouldn't want to. My memories of the Conservatory always come back to Anne and Boyd, who presided over the school with humor, wit, and devotion. They loved music and they loved kids and they loved teaching, and they provided a haven for all of us who came of age during the tumultuous years of the 1960s.

As I recall, I started studying modern dance with the inimitable Fanya Del Bourgo when I was four or five. By the time I was in the fourth grade I was deemed old enough to walk to the Conservatory from school by myself. I would leave the Carrie E. Tomkins School early on the day of my piano lesson with Neal Marcus, and I was to wait until Neal came and summoned me for my lesson. In the waiting room, I was surrounded by the sound of music-making. Good, bad, or indifferent, it didn't matter - the sound of people making music was always beautiful. I was surrounded by friends, since so many of my friends and the children of my parents' friends studied there. Frequently, Boyd would pop out of his studio (which in my memory was located right next to the waiting room) and he always greeted me with his characteristic brand of ironic, affectionate chivalry. I particularly remember him giving me careful instructions on how to make myself a cup of instant chicken bouillon using the hot water urn. Something about the way he did this suggested that this was a secret shared just between the two of us - a special adult treat that he was letting me in on. At the time I always assumed that his warm welcome was due to the fact that he was a family friend, but in retrospect, I bet he made every single student at the Conservatory feel special. Anne was perhaps less flamboyant than Boyd - it would be hard to rival him in that regard - but she was a great wit and a hilarious story-teller in her own right. She had the wondrous gift of talking to even very young children as if they were adults. As I write this, it occurs to me that the waiting room of the Bennett Conservatory was the place where I began to grow into my adult self: getting there independently, and establishing my own relationships with grown-ups beyond my own family.

There was an office adjacent to the waiting room which was presided over by a succession of older kids - teenagers, most of whom I knew through the Croton Shakespeare Festival. I saw this office role as a position of great authority, even though I have no idea what responsibilities were involved: probably answering the phone, filling that hot water urn and making sure the supply of instant coffee and bouillon and hot cups didn't run out, and ensuring we younger kids behaved ourselves. I remember most clearly a period during which the young man who was in charge (probably a guitar student of Anne's) would accompany himself as he sang Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'", pretty much non-stop. The times were indeed a-changing. Croton

was not exempt from the tensions of the era, and there was plenty of political ferment within our community, in which both the Bennetts and the Davises were occasionally involved. The musical environment at the Conservatory was, for me, part of that - a place that gave us, in music, a medium through which to express, or to escape, those conflicts.

I already mentioned that the Conservatory was a place where you'd expect to see your friends and experience new kinds of music, drama, or dance together. It was also a place to make new friends and could occasionally provide a window into the world beyond our own social circles. In the waiting room I met and became friends with one of Anne's guitar students, and we remained friends until we graduated from high school. This was a funny and feisty blind girl named Donna, who lived a few towns north of Croton. An older sister and her husband were living with Donna's family at the time; Donna's brother-in-law had just returned from a tour of duty in Vietnam. On one occasion he stumbingly tried to communicate to us something of the horrors he'd witnessed there - I realize now that he must have been struggling with PTSD. My family and most of our friends were vehemently anti-war and until that moment I had never heard the perspective of a Vietnam War veteran. The empathy I felt for this young man touched me and changed my worldview, subtly and permanently. The music and the sense of community at the Conservatory made that connection possible.

So, what do I most keenly remember about the Conservatory? It was so integral to my childhood, my early life, my becoming who I became, that it's hard to summarize. A place to experience and explore and express. A place to study, to perform, to learn. A safe place in which to get ready for the rest of my life. There could not have been a better place in which to develop the love of music that continues to nourish me, every single day.

Ellen Mendelsohn
Santa Fe, New Mexico

Small in stature, large in presence, Fanya Del Bourgo touched the hearts of so many young dancers and wanna-be dancers in the basement of the Bennett Conservatory.

Weekly we would skip into the stone building on Van Wyck Street with our leotards and ballet shoes in hand and rush downstairs to change for our class. As a little girl, seven or eight years of age, I thought the studio was so large; it was both intimidating and awe inspiring. Fanya would be downstairs, and without delay would get us started, first on the barre, then on the floor. Whether it was going through the positions, stretching, or doing plies or arabesques, and even leaping across the studio floor, her expectations were simply that you do your best.

On her record player, there were piles of albums. She would choose music that suited the exercise, movement or routine she wanted us to practice. She never shied from demonstrating and for those of us who were not so flexible, Fanya only encouraged us, with a hand on the back, a gentle lift of an arm, or a quiet word. This was Fanya's way, always making you feel you were a valuable member of the class, even if you weren't the star ballerina.

My experience, as not the greatest or most flexible dance student (I was well aware of this fact), was that Fanya would place me in the middle of an arc of students. This was not only in rehearsal but for the recital as well. Of course the best dancer was placed up front and we all knew who

she was... But it was Fanya telling me that she placed me in the middle because I knew all the movements, that the others, if they got lost or were unsure of the choreography, could find their way back, because of me. I was made to feel I was an integral piece of something.

Fanya's impeccable posture, elegant style, and commanding, yet safe demeanor made us feel special. Dance was a team effort with both group and individual successes. No one was more or less important.

The best dancer or the wanna-be dancer received equal attention and love from Fanya. She was the prima ballerina and a prima teacher.

Shari Tanguay

*Choreographer (retired) Artist
Lee, MA*

My brother Steven and I studied at the Conservatory from about 1964 until 1973. He took guitar lessons. I took dance class with Fanya! (My sister Su did later too) We all feel like without that foundation, none of us would have continued pursuing these arts. I danced and choreographed, and taught throughout my life! My brother owns a Campground in Searsport Maine and has a festival there in the fall. He still plays guitar with multiple groups! My sister took up singing and worked in theater for a while. We grew up outside of town, and I cherished being able to walk to the studio with my dance bag after school once I got into 7th grade! It was truly one of my favorite places to be, down in that little studio with the low ceiling; I loved leaping and jumping; you had to time it right so as not to hit your head on the beam! Fanya would put down National Geographic magazines in different spacing and that's what you had to try to leap over! Then of course we always had a little break and went upstairs for a graham cracker! As a teacher Fanya always encouraged my desire to choreograph, and she got me into some adult Shakespeare productions, and she would let me work on lighting for a concert. It was an extremely well-rounded experience! I wish only I had more photos! Thank you, Bennett Conservatory!

Amy Rolnick

*Truro, MA
Retired*

We came after school, year after year, walking over from PVC, or down from CET or CHHS....on past the Upper Village's shops, past Elliot's, stopping in Pop Berger's for pixie straws...and later, where did we get the apricot leather...from The Village Gallery across the street from Pop's? And past the churchs to Van Wyck turning left as we strolled...past the Muni Building on the right.... CCNS was not much further along but now here on the left: The Bennett. Never referred to as anything else but The Bennett. Down the pathway through the middle of the front yard, In the front door, solid and heavy, and down the hall. On either side, if memory serves (it's been nearly 60 years), the heavy many mullioned French doors...from behind them issued partly muted sounds...was that Judy Fuhring or Seth Davis taking cello class? Jonathan Karpoff on violin maybe? Or the recorder class of young ones. The squawk of a badly played clarinet...who? And to the big waiting room, with the heavy table pushed against the walls under the windows. We did our homework there, books spread out as if we were at home...which is

what it felt like of course...Anne or Boyd passing by or in the office bent over the desk...kindly presences, familiar, respected... And then it was class time...we'd hustle down the steep stairs to the dance studio...heavy rough stone walls white washed, the gleaming wooden dance floor and the barre stretched along two walls....to the right the slight drop down to the seating area where , on recital days, indulgent parents and sometimes, long suffering siblings too, would sit, on folding chairs to watch our performance. To the left and through the door to the changing room and into tights and leotard...then barefoot to the barre as the class began. And all eyes and thoughts on Fanya...tiny, tough, indomitable and ... generous...and for many of us, I think, a lode star of sorts...there was an independence about her...a confident wholeness we responded to. To the discipline and the artistry... and then there was the music, always the music..Appalachian Spring comes to mind... Prokofieff.... The Bennett was a central fact of Croton life and stands strong in our memories.

Timothy George
High School Math Teacher
BCM student 1994-2003
Boston, MA

I credit The Bennett, at a very early age, helping me to connect with others through music. Some of my closest friends I made through The Bennett, and it allowed me to realize how those friendships can be really strong if you have that shared love of music. Even though I wasn't involved in The Conservatory during high school, the connections that I had with my friends playing music were super important to me and different than other friendships. So, I credit The Bennett with teaching me how to love music and teaching me to connect to others through music as well. I certainly remember Ms. Magdalena and her charm and kindness; I remember The Bennett as just a safe place that I could go to make mistakes in music, learn, and challenge myself.

**To add *your* memory, please email bennettconservatory@gmail.com or mail to
18 Van Wyck St., Croton-on-Hudson, NY 10520**



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