Violinist turns 1920 house grandpa â??Moffâ?? built into center for teaching and performance

Description

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A baby grand piano resides regally in one corner of the great room of the white-washed, brick Spanish Colonial that in 1920 was the highest dwelling on Twin Peaks, the second highest hill in the city. It was built by Edward Moffitt, maternal grandfather to Lynn Oakley, its present resident.

â??Moffâ??sâ?• house was once the highest dwelling on Twin Peaks. (Most photos courtesy of Lynn Oakley.)

â??It was like entering a castle and being met with whiffs of an interesting mixture of furniture oil, eucalyptus and red wine,â?• Oakley said of visits in her youth to grandfather â??Moffâ??sâ?• house. Moffitt was a builder, furniture craftsman, writer, musician, aviator, sailor and model ship maker. He and his wife, Honorah, or â??Babe,â?• entertained luminaries such as writer Sinclair Lewis.

Moffâ??s house is now home to Oakleyâ??s Villa Sinfonia Foundation, dedicated to developing string musicians of all ages and abilities, through the performance of chamber music and chamber orchestra music, assisted and coached by professional musicians.

Violin pulled her heart strings

Oakley learned to play the violin under the tutelage of her mother, a piano prodigy. â??As a young person, when she came home from the symphony, she could just sit down and play everything she heard,â?• Oakley said. Piano wasnâ??t Oakleyâ??s passion, and in junior high school, when she had to choose between playing the tuba or the violin, she chose the latter.

Lynn Oakley studied at San Francisco State University, whose music school she says is on a par with Julliard. (Photo by Jan Robbins.)

â??I loved the violin, the sound of it, the melodies you can play on it,â?• Oakley said. The violin was what made Oakleyâ??s heart soar and led her to the sweetheart who would become her husband. She met Roy Oakley in her first year of music college. After graduation and marriage, they formed a violin studio, which ultimately led to creation of The Villa Sinfonia Foundation.

What is unique about the program is the inter-generational aspect, Oakley said. â??With eight-year-olds sitting next to professional musicians in the orchestra and teenagers with younger children, itâ??s everyone helping each other in different ways.â?•

â??Iâ??m presently teaching a three-year-old and her mother, and Father Phil dâ??Auby, 96, a Marist Priest, from the church of Norte Dame de Victoires in San Francisco, who started lessons at 75,â?• Oakley said. â??Heâ??s in a wheelchair now but still playing. In prior years, he went with us to Carnegie Hall and Italy to perform.â?•

Immersion learning

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The foundation has two orchestras â?? The Villa Sinfonia Chamber Orchestra and the Villa Chamber Orchestra â?? that practice in donated church spaces. At her home, she holds private lessons and Suzuki group classes, which can include children as young as three. The concept comes from Japanese violinist Shinichi Suzuki, who observed how small children easily learn language by imitating their parents. He thought children could learn music the same way, by hearing music all around them.

Students in Oakleyâ??s Suzuki class.

â??Students are listening all the time to recordings and doing a lot of bow games,â?• Oakley said. â??The parent takes the bulk of the lesson, so at home, the parent can help their child learn how to hold the bow and the (miniature) violin.â?• If a child learns the techniques properly, the sound can be pleasing right from the beginning, she added.

â??My husband was the brains behind forming a foundation,â?• said Oakley. â??In order to hire professional musicians to teach, play in the orchestras and tutor in camp, we needed to raise money. Creating a foundation where donations are tax-deductible worked out really well.â?• They also formed a collective bargaining agreement with Musicians Union Local No. 6. â??We pay a good wage and provide a pension,â?• she said.

High hopes

Oakley is now 73 and has been running The Villa Sinfonia Foundation solo since her husband died in June 2020. â??We have a great board, raised a good sum last year, but eventually Iâ??m going to need help,â?• she said. â??My dream is to buy a building, where we can conduct classes, house all our records and hire a manager to oversee operations.â?•

Oakley wearing the foundationâ??s T-shirt.

Right now, sheâ??s on the foundationâ??s board, teaches three Suzuki classes, has 26 private students, and is Concert Mistress, or first chair, of the violins in their orchestra. â??I work with the conductor to interpret the music and teach all the other violins,â?• she said.

Other than that, she enjoys visits from her son and his family and plays violin in Gilbert and Sullivan comic operas with the San Francisco Lamplighters Theater Company, and sonatas with world-renown

pianist William Corbett Jones.

When Oakley was researching which music school to attend, she discovered that San Francisco State University was on par with Julliard. â??It was like a conservatory in the late â??60s, with many wonderful teachers from the SF Symphony,â?• Oakley said.

One day, while practicing a concerto in a private studio, she heard a student copying her playing in a studio close by. â??I stuck my head out to see who it was,â?• Oakley said, â??and the boy who was copying me, stuck his head out of his studio and smiled.â?• That boy was Roy Oakley.

â??We were so similar in our goals,â?• she said. â??After music school, we both got jobs in public school, in symphonies and had private clients.â?• Oakley never doubted she could make a living with her music. â??I had private clients even while I was in music school when I was living at home with my parents.â?•

The Oakleyâ??s started the violin studio in their home on Twin Peaks in 1977, a few streets down from Oakleyâ??s grandfatherâ??s home, where she has lived since 2010. â??To fill out the sound, besides violins, we invited people who played violas and cellos to play together,â?• Oakley said.

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A family atmosphere

Creating the Villa Sinfonia Foundation in 1994 enabled them to hire professional musicians, create an international touring program and establish the Zephyr Music Camp in Lake Tahoe. Students, who focus on chamber orchestra and ensemble practice, have performed in various Bay Area events and put on a yearly Family and Friends Ensemble. â??The Family and Friends Ensemble is the sweetest concert we do, where we branch out from classical music to jazz, even rock and roll,â?• Oakley said.

Students rehearsing for a performance in Budapest.

The Villa Sinfonia Foundation is all about creating a big family atmosphere. â??Children and non-professionals hear the sounds of the professionals sitting next to them, and benefit greatly from that, as they do from the professionals teaching them fingerings and bowings and marking their parts for them,â?• Oakley said.

A predominant philosophy at Villa Sinfonia is fostering achievement without competition. â??We donâ??t have auditions,â?• Oakley said. â??We rely on teacher recommendations as to which orchestra to place the student in. The students work really hard and when theyâ??re ready, they move up.â?•

As for Oakley, in spite of her busy schedule, sheâ??s ready to move up, too â?? to something new. A classical music buff, she said she wants to tackle a different musical genre. â??I would like to learn how to improvise, like jazz violinist Stephane Grappelli.â?•

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