



From the Choir to River Concert Series to Alba Festival

Looking Back, Looking Forward

By David Froom, professor and chair, music department

Last year, for the first time, and again this year, the *Fiske Guide* to best colleges listed St. Mary's College of Maryland as one of the best small colleges in the country for music study. It was a wonderful surprise and a terrific validation of what so many people have worked to create here.

Music had always been a big part of the St. Mary's experience. Past highlights from the 1960s-1980s include the jazz band under Professor Bob Levy, the wind ensemble under Professor Bob Cameron, and the Tidewater Music Festival, directed and produced by Professor John Laughton, which hosted gifted pre-college students interacting with visiting artists like Aaron Copland and Lukas Foss. But the College was changing, particularly as President Ted Lewis began an ambitious effort to enhance quality.

In 1989, when I arrived, Jeff Silberschlag was beginning his third year as orchestral conductor. Choir director Larry Vote (now vice president for academic affairs) had just returned from his first sabbatical. Pianist Brian Ganz had recently arrived. Pianist Eliza Garth, my partner, joined a part-time faculty that included violinist José Cueto and bassoonist Deborah Greitzer. Things were basically good – though we had a serious turnover/recruitment problem among part-timers. We started the process of rethinking the Music Department's program, wondering how we could make things better.

As faculty came and went, this core group continued to create a new vision of music at the College. Five years ago, we completed what we believe to be an ideal faculty when we were joined by professors Sterling Lambert and Deborah Lawrence. Each of us has strong ideas about what we should be, based mostly on the examples of where we studied: Juilliard, Manhattan School of Music, University of Michigan, Yale, Columbia, University of Chicago, Cambridge University, and University of California at Berkeley. Silberschlag and Greitzer added the perspective of having held principal chairs in major European orchestras.

With a stable faculty, our shared principles emerged:

- We want a department where all students, majors or non-majors, at all levels of previous experience, feel welcome and can have education

(classes, lessons, ensemble experiences) at the highest possible level: We meet students where they are and take them as far as they can go.

- We want an atmosphere where music-making and study is inspirational and mutually supportive, not a competition or a grind.
- We seek a diverse and wide set of opportunities for our students to perform with each other and with professionals, including their teachers.
- We want the highest academic standards.
- We want a collegial atmosphere in which faculty will wish to stay and participate fully.
- We want significant community interest, engagement, and support for our activities.

Working towards these goals, we remained an excellent department, but not significantly different from any number of music departments elsewhere. We started to become unique when we began to understand how, working together, each of us could use our individual strengths as builders while respecting the greater strengths of others in other arenas.

The success from which all others flow is the annual summer River Concert Series and the Chesapeake Orchestra. It had always been Jeff Silberschlag's vision to start a different kind of music festival, imagining

it as a cultural hub for students and for the community. Once the department and the College embraced his vision, amazing things started happening. Support, partnerships, and crucial contributions came from Larry Vote, then-president Maggie O'Brien, vice presidents Torre Meringolo and Tom Botzman, arts outreach director Barbara Bershon, and community relations director Nell Hampton. Our part-time music faculty has continuously provided talent, energy, ideas, and leadership, filling principal positions in the fabulous Chesapeake Orchestra; trombonist Bryan Bourne, in particular, has been vital in building the orchestra.

Pieces of the River Concert Series (RCS) – now 12-years-old – resemble other festivals, but in totality it is unique.

Jeff believed our community would support – financially and with their attendance – a seven-week professional orchestral series. Attendance is an astonishing 35,000 per summer. Financial and moral support has come from almost every major local business, the county (the commissioners and the Arts Council in particular), and the state (the state Arts Council, and who can forget seeing Governor O'Malley with his band playing at a River Concert last year). Patuxent River Naval Air Station got in-

involved. The College's Board of Trustees – especially Tom Waring, Michael O'Brien, Bonnie Green, Harry Weitzel, Ben Bradlee, Thomas Penfield Jackson, and Steny Hoyer – helped make an environment where this could flourish. Our local community gets the credit for the family-friendly atmosphere: kids – toddlers through teenagers – happily share space with parents and grandparents, and anyone who doesn't meet or make a friend just isn't trying! College faculty and staff (and their families) have been among our most loyal supporters.

Students also play a central role. Talented high school students from the community come to the RCS through their teachers and the concerto competition, having their first opportunity to play with a professional orchestra. Our college students play in the orchestra seated near their teachers. As interns, they are expected to work at a professional level while learning all the "ins and outs" of concert/stage management. Student workers include our most ambitious music majors, but also many non-major students who simply want to be part of this unique experience.

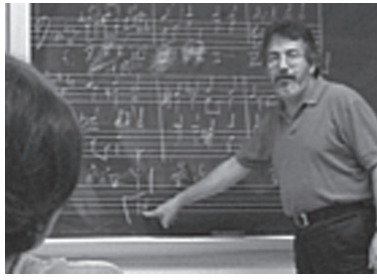
Looking beyond the RCS, we sought to enhance our work overseas. Like many music departments, we did summer European student tours. Ten years ago, Vote and Silberschlag had the idea of a permanent overseas home. They found an ideal location in Italy's Piedmont region. Using the River Concert Series as a basic template, with significant and ongoing support from the Waldschmitt family and in partnership with Italian flutist Giuseppe Nova, the Alba Music Festival is now a major international festival: 24 concerts over 11 days each May in the town of Alba, supported in large part by local Piedmont businesses and governmental agencies. Approximately 60 students (singers, instrumentalists, and composers from the College and around the U.S.) join faculty and prominent, award-winning musicians from all over Europe for intensive rehearsing, performing, and master classes.

Alba also is now home to one of St. Mary's "signature" international studies programs, the only music department-run U.S. program in Italy. Students in Alba have a full semester to study music intensively, working

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Choral director Larry Vote directs singers at the Alba Music Festival, part of the rich fabric of music opportunities at the College.



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with faculty from the major conservatories in Turin and Milan.

Because of all these activities, we have been able to assemble – and retain – a wonderful faculty. Teaching part-time here has become a highly desirable job for the area's best musicians. That, in turn, has improved

things immensely for students.

These initiatives, both at home and abroad, also have improved the quality of our regular program offerings, as well as the quality of all our students, majors or not. Students tell us that they chose to come here because they can study music with us, no matter their major. In any given semester, we work with about 15% of the student body.

Froom is a much-honored composer (Guggenheim fellow, 2003; American Academy of Arts and Letters Academy Award in Music, 2006). His music, published by American Composers Edition, is regularly performed throughout the world, and is widely available on CD. He has been on the faculty of St. Mary's since 1989, serving as department chair 1993-95, and since 2004 has been co-chair with Jeffrey Silberschlag.

Community support consistently shows immense goodwill towards the College. Our students benefit directly: Recently, a long-time fan of our activities, Arthur Zamanakos, made a major donation to the music department in memory of his wife, Alice Fenwick Fleury Zamanakos. His donation supports noon concerts, student scholarship, student Alba travel, and the purchase of a fine teaching piano.

Where do we go from here? We really need a proper performance space – something long on the College's future plans for building growth. And who knows what unique and exciting undertaking Jeff will launch next! We're thrilled to have been discovered by Fiske, but ultimately want only the best for our students, whose

Whether it is professor Brian Ganz playing piano, left, or high school student Ian Chaava, right, at this summer's River Concert Series, or professor David Froom in class, or students in Alba, Italy, there are many outlets for music study at the College.

needs continue to guide future plans. They are, after all, the reason we are here, and are the ones whose lives will define the future of the world's music.