



By **NEIL STYLINSKI**

Mountainside Baroque co-directors Lyle and Pat Nordstrom and Ryan Mullaney.

Photo by Jennifer Amendolara

EARLY AND IDYLLIC

MOUNTAINSIDE BAROQUE *has carved out a niche away from urban centers*

Exquisite things, however rare, seem to collect in obvious places. New York, Boston, San Francisco—these grand cities and others stand as high ground on the American cultural landscape. With respect to early music, such places are bejeweled, as one would expect. But among an embarrassment of riches, even lustrous gems must compete for attention.

In sharp relief stands Cumberland, a picturesque and historic if unassuming post-industrial city in Western Maryland just south of the Pennsylvania border with a population of around 20,000. Among the residents is the brilliant Mountainside Baroque, the only professional early-music performance organization within 100 miles—and one of the finest anywhere.

“Mountainside Baroque was a happy accident,” said Lyle Nordstrom, a founding co-director and renowned lutenist. Nordstrom and his wife, viola da gamba and wind player Pat, had just retired from academic careers that culminated at the University of North Texas and its highly regarded early-music program. Well-traveled in pursuit of music, they are, by their own account, not city people.



“Three Violins, Three Generations” (from left): Stanley Ritchie, Alan Whear, Elliot Figg, Cynthia Roberts (student of Ritchie), Lyle Nordstrom, and Brandi Berry (student of Roberts and Ritchie) at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church in October 2012.

Both Midwesterners by birth and sensibility, they also aren’t fond of Texas heat and humidity or a lack of seasons. With grandkids in urban Maryland—the only Maryland even most Marylanders know, really—and the university town of Frostburg nearby, the Nordstroms chose Cumberland as the place to kick back, spend more time on hobbies, and enjoy the bike trails.

“I was biking one day and stopped to talk with an acquaintance,” said Nordstrom. “This happens quite often in Cumberland. When I described my background, he said, ‘Huh, there’s a clavichord player coming down the trail I’d like you to meet.’ I knew only a couple of clavichord players in the world. Eric Kitchen of Cumberland would soon be the third.

“At nearly the same time, I heard from a former student, Rebecca Beasley—one of the most evocative singers I’ve ever encountered. She and her architect husband wanted to visit us and tour Fallingwater and another Frank Lloyd Wright house in the area. I said, ‘While you’re here, why don’t we do a concert?’ So it was Rebecca, Eric, Pat, and I for this one-off concert. With little publicity, 50 people turned out.”

“Immediately afterward, I ran up and said, who are you and where did you come from?” said Ryan Mullaney, Mountainside Baroque’s other founding co-director and a Cumberland native. “It was an exciting moment for me because I had just dipped my toe into period performance practice at Temple University as a choral conductor and vocalist and had returned home for a position at a Catholic church. It was eye-opening to see an event of such high quality in my hometown, of all places.”

Nordstrom and Mullaney quickly found common ground and developed a plan for a series to start in late 2011 under the Mountainside Baroque banner. Critically, Nordstrom could muster colleagues and former students at the many fine institutions clustered within driving distance of Cumberland. Among those, The Juilliard School, Eastman School of Music, and University of Michigan filled the bill.

Amply blessed with charisma and the power of persuasion, Mullaney at

Mountainside Baroque continues as a collective seven years on.

“We bring different musicians in for every concert to make each one different and keep fresh faces in front of our audience,” Nordstrom said. “We also vary the music, ranging from the 16th- to 18th-century, from folk to classical, from secular to non-secular. Lessons and Carols at Christmastime is a popular event. We also usually do some major work each season. This ensures variety. People aren’t necessarily aware of that complexity,

strong artistic element alive here. Cumberland has an arts council, a professional theater company, lots of live music. The schools have strong music programs. Frostburg State has an excellent performing arts series. When we bring in musicians, many of them young, our audience experiences their talent and energy, and it’s really a shot in the arm for them.”

”Mind you,” said Mullaney, “Cumberland is still no New York. But for Mountainside Baroque, that’s a good



Cumberland, Maryland, looking across the Potomac River and the Blue Bridge to West Virginia and the mountains beyond.

Photo by Lyle Nordstrom

age 25 was already well connected in the region musically and could round up fellow vocalists. Pat could contribute musically, as she had since her undergraduate days at Macalester College in Minnesota, where she and Lyle met as freshmen. Playing to her strengths, she would also be the organizer and manage the myriad details. Or would she?

“I was going to take up weaving,” she said. “But I’ve always been swept along by Lyle’s enthusiasm. I love the music and felt the community would, too.”

but when they come they really do enjoy it.”

Added Mullaney: “I remember performing Telemann’s *Der Tod Jesu* at the end of our second season, a daunting oratorio for musicians and audiences alike. We had 250 people in the church who over the evening went from polite applause to rousing enthusiasm. Man, that was exciting!”

“An early supporter,” said Pat, “told us there were many people here who appreciate quality. Like many predominantly rural areas, western Maryland has seen economic hardship. But there’s still a

thing. In some ways, we have it easier than a new organization in a big city, because those places already offer lots of choices for culture and early music. Here people need this. Many locals have never heard this type of music performed in this way. They are hungry for it.”

Musicians find Mountainside Baroque especially attractive, too, said Nordstrom.

“They don’t come for the money so much, although we are able to pay them better than when we started. They think of it as a *gig*-cation. Even the New Yorkers say, ‘This is heaven, the air is so good, it’s so quiet.’ We also have more really good



Photo by Patricia Nordstrom

Lyle Nordstrom and Paul O'Dette playing Dowland's "My Lord Chamberlain, His Galliard for two to play on one lute" at a Mountainside Baroque concert at Baltimore's Church of the Nativity in April 2016.

venues in Cumberland than anywhere else I've been—wonderful historical churches and museums.” Nordstrom added, “Our musicians come in the spirit of reunion to join people they know and like working with. My philosophy is, the best music is made with people you like.”

Mullaney agrees. “Our musicians know that with Mountainside Baroque they are among friends,” said the Cumberlander and now Seattle resident (while finishing a doctoral degree in conducting). “That these friends have come to love Cumberland nearly as much as we do makes it even more gratifying.”

Pat describes Lyle as a Pied Piper. If so, he's a humble one. He's been at the front of the early-music revival since the formation of The Musicians of Swanne Alley.

“I was in Europe in 1976 researching consort music. I crossed paths with Paul O'Dette, a young genius and virtuoso lute player about to start a job at Eastman,” said Nordstrom. “I told him I have this thought about forming a consort, and that includes you. We co-directed Swanne Alley for 20 years. We toured internationally, released four CDs, and made many festival and television appearances. People still come up to me and say, ‘These are still some of my favorite CDs.’ Paul is now co-director of the Boston Early Music Festival. He's made probably 200 CDs and won many Grammys. If he's not the most important person in the revival of early music, I don't know who is.”

Swanne Alley's music was used in the movie *Rob Roy*. The consort's recorded work remains largely available on CD and Spotify.

While generally happy with the impact of Mountainside Baroque on their community, the Nordstroms and Mullaney felt they could do more. With the help of visiting faculty drawn from the collective, the Mountainside Baroque Summer Academy launched in 2016. Aimed at middle school, high school, and early college students, the weeklong workshop goes well beyond the recorder ensemble so typical for instruction at this age level.

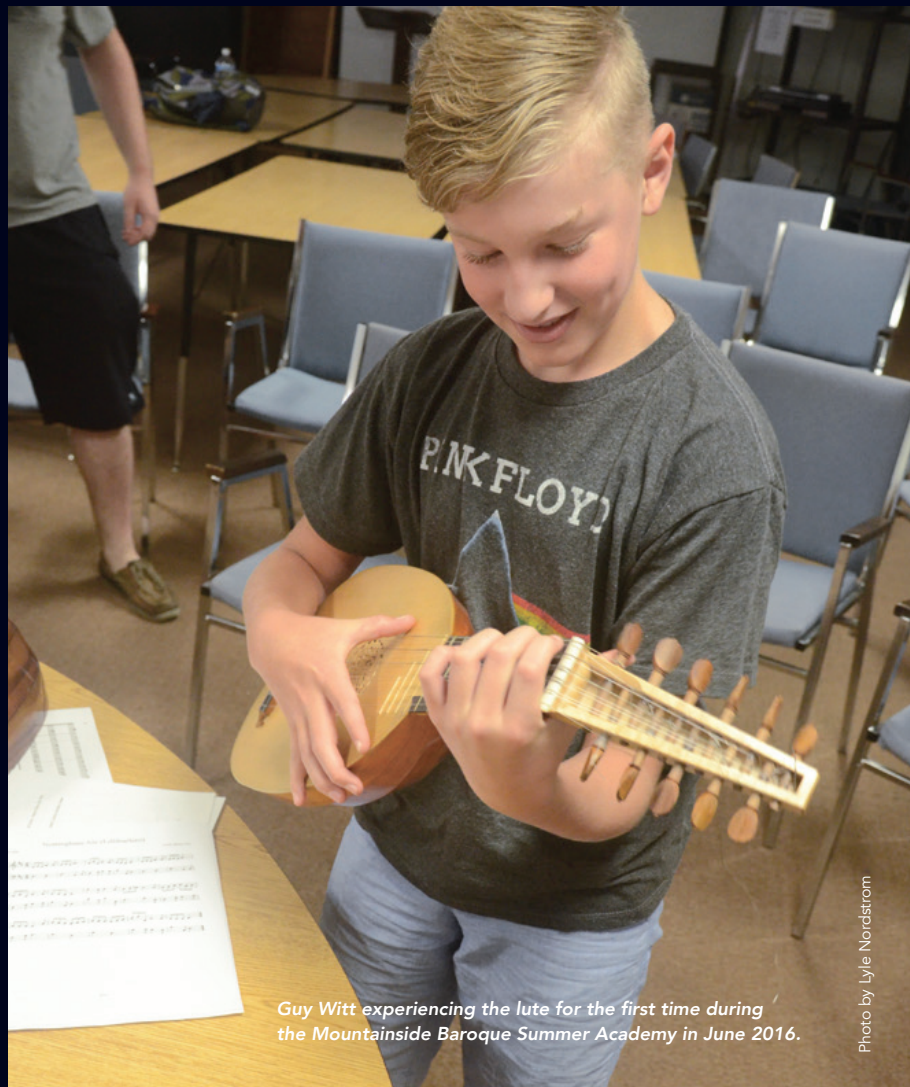
“We do things on the *gesamt* level where we bring the orchestra, the winds, and the singers all together,” Nordstrom said. “To my knowledge, this is unique in the U.S. for this younger age group.”

Leading to the final academy performance, students receive instruction on instrumental or vocal technique, early-music performance practices such as ornamentation, music theory, and other fundamentals. They also get a taste of Baroque dance, art, history, and pizza. Well, the pizza's not Baroque, but part of a mid-week pool party, one of several planned extracurricular activities.

“We need to cultivate the next generation of early musicians, and we should do this when they are young,” Mullaney says. “Our academy stresses early performance practice and history so that the music lives off

the page. It's not just ink on parchment. It's alive and in the ether and different every time you perform it. That kind of empowerment is unusual for young musicians. Even if they don't further pursue early music, they will have a better ear and feel more creative in their music making. No matter what, early music will be part of their life experience and what they value. And frankly, we need a new generation of not just musicians but audience members.”

More broadly, he continued, “We don't need to relive history. It's not even important to recreate history. It's to take the best things from the past and try to make them relevant again and understood by a new generation to know where we came from.”



Guy Witt experiencing the lute for the first time during the Mountainside Baroque Summer Academy in June 2016.

Photo by Lyle Nordstrom



Ryan Mullaney leading the Scholars of St. Cecilia, Mountainside Baroque's resident choir, in a "Festival of Lessons and Carols" at Emmanuel Episcopal Parish in 2016.

Photo by Neil Styliniski

This summer, Mountainside Baroque takes on Music in the Mountains Summer Festival, an ambitious four-day event. Nordstrom said the festival will feature some of the best ensembles in the U.S., including TENET and the Newberry Consort, whose program will comprise a Renaissance violin band and soprano Ellen Hargis performing music from the early 16th century. Fortepianist Christoph Hammer will play music by Mozart and others with violinist Cynthia Roberts.

The festival also will present a performance of Handel's oratorio *Alexander's Feast*, which “will bring everybody together, all the members of these ensembles to then make up the major portion of the orchestra and the soloists,” said Nordstrom.

The activity will include side concerts at historical venues around Cumberland, one featuring the Washington Cornett and Sackbutt Ensemble. Mountainside Baroque will reprise its *Britain to the Blue Ridge* concert, accompanied thematically by a major display at the Allegany Museum depicting the history of the music coming from England into the Appalachians. “There will be master classes, lectures, and historic tours, things that will more than fill a person's day,” said Nordstrom.

Mullaney said he and the Nordstroms “started Mountainside Baroque where we did because of a shared love of the area's history.”

That history goes back to colonial times and George Washington's adventures here as a young man. It cuts as deep as the Underground Railroad tunnels exposed beneath Emmanuel Episcopal Church,

a frequent venue for Mountainside Baroque. And it runs as long as the C&O Canal, intended to scale the Alleghenies but instead terminated appropriately at the beautiful old railway station that now serves the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad.

“We want to highlight that history as a means of improving the culture and quality of life here for current and future residents,” Mullaney said. “An event like this can widen a community, push its borders outward. For their part, visitors from neighboring metro areas will find in Cumberland a place of some sophistication but lots of small-town charm. Above all, the festival is a chance to bring fantastic musicians together so they can collaborate. My hope is to have a wonderful four days of early music with people who love this as much as we do.”

The Mountainside Baroque Summer Academy will be held June 11-15.
Music in the Mountains Summer Festival takes place June 14-17. For information,
go to <https://www.mountainsidebaroque.org/>

After a career in video production and television news magazines, Neil Styliniski relocated from southern California to Cumberland, MD. When not gazing into the valley, he continues to ply his craft as writer, producer, and image maker, now mainly in service to worthy nonprofit organizations.