

# KANDINSKY TRIO

## Trio con brio

Banter and expert musicianship has kept the Kandinsky Trio together for a quarter of a century.

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By Mike Allen



SALEM — The Kandinsky Trio have played together for 25 years, and known one another longer.

Ask their ages, though, and they get a little coy.

“I did move here in my 20s,” said cellist Alan Weinstein, a remark that causes his fellow musicians to laugh uproariously. He points to violinist Benedict Goodfriend and says, “Bendy was 14.”

“And I was 3,” pianist Elizabeth Bachelder interjects.

And how do those 25 years together feel?

“Like 50,” says Bachelder.

“Like 80,” retorts Weinstein.

The trio has been a mainstay of the Roanoke Valley art scene since 1987, playing four concerts a year in Roanoke College’s Olin Hall - a remarkable achievement in a time when chamber music struggles to find an audience.

“I think we built a fan base. That really helps,” Bachelder said. “We do see the same faces at most of our concerts.”

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Fans of Roanoke College's resident chamber music trio know that the comedic banter and the expert musicianship go hand in hand. The trio's brochures have reflected the same sense of humor, starting with its 15th season, when the three posed for photos dressed as 15-year-olds.

"We haven't progressed since," Bachelder said.

And yet when the three settle down in Bachelder's piano room to rehearse Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich's Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor, Opus 67 - all the cutting up stops.

The passion Goodfriend feels for the piece is evident on his face as he plays. Bachelder rocks side to side in tempo with her part, and Weinstein's impassive expression belies the intensity of his playing.

Once finished, they talk about beats skipped or crescendos reached too soon. Despite how often they joke about how much they "hate" one another, there's no rancor evident.

New music, refreshingly

They'll be playing that Shostakovich piece at the final concert of their 25th season, which takes place Saturday in Olin Hall. They'll also play music by Haydn and three new works, part of a series the trio has commissioned for a program called "25 X 25" - 25 short compositions from 25 composers.

"It's fun because there is a finite amount of piano trio repertoire in the world, and we've been through a lot of it," Bachelder said. "It's nice to have new pieces to intersperse with old favorites."

Counting three new compositions in Saturday's concert, the Kandinsky Trio will have debuted 12 of the new works when they conclude this season, and they'll introduce 13 more in their next season.

The three are especially proud of being able to debut a new work in their 26th season from Richard Danielpour, an American composer who has written music for the likes of Yo-Yo Ma and numerous large symphonies. Danielpour's piece is called "A Desert Wanderer."

Goodfriend joked that on the list of musicians and ensembles Danielpour has composed for, "we're the only ones I've never heard of."

"25 x 25" isn't the trio's only ongoing project. In 2010 the trio received a \$15,000 "American Masterpieces" grant from the National Endowment for the Arts that's allowing them to record jazz-flavored works by Boston composer Gunther Schuller and Charlottesville composer and trumpet player John D'earth, with whom they've collaborated in the past.

The CD, to be released this year, will feature guest artists such as Kurt Rosenwinkel, whom the New York Times calls "a jazz guitarist of glowing lyricism and graceful exposition." Having guest musicians allows them to record a piano quartet by Schuller called "On Light Wings," written in 1984. It's the first-ever recording of the composition.

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The Kandinsky Trio will also debut a new piece by D'earth during Saturday's performance.

Recalling the lows

The Kandinsky Trio are artists-in-residence at Roanoke College. Bachelder is a teacher there as well, while Weinstein is a music professor at Virginia Tech. Goodfriend offers private tutoring.

Though Roanoke College provides a home base, the trio doesn't just stay at home. They've performed more than 1,000 concerts in more than 200 cities in the United States, Canada and Europe.

They've also ventured outside classic music, through such projects as the Kandinsky Beat Down, in which they worked with beat box artists and hip-hop dancers.

Amusingly, through a career characterized by longevity, grant awards and performances throughout the world, they can't immediately single out any career highlights. "We can identify the low points," Bachelder said.

Weinstein recalls a performance of French romantic composer Camille Saint-Saens' "Carnival of the Animals" at a zoo that actually involved playing in front of the animals - the section called "The Swan" was played before swans, for example.

A show in 1992 had the trio thinking their careers might be over, Bachelder said. It went badly from the start.

"We walked on stage and no one applauded," Weinstein said.

Yet the next day they learned they'd won a prestigious residency planning grant from Chamber Music America, the publishers of Chamber Music magazine.

Weinstein recalled another performance that went so poorly that "we couldn't talk to each other afterward. We were white-faced." But the next morning, "We got a rave review!"

There have also been performances that drew standing ovations - and a scathing review in the next day's paper.

The puckish trio has been known to include snippets from those bad reviews in their publicity material.

"Once in a while we quote a bad review and just say 'Oops!'" Goodfriend said.

While it's not unheard of for a chamber music trio to spend a quarter of century together or longer without changing its lineup, "it's very special," said Ellen Goldensohn, publications director of Chamber Music America. Other examples she cited include the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio in New York, now 36 years old.

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“Time and tide often pulls lives in different ways,” Goldensohn said. “They’ve dodged a lot of bullets.”

Goodfriend and Weinstein were roommates at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston , and Bachelder and Weinstein attended the Eastman School of Music at different times, so their musical backgrounds have similarities. Yet something more than that has kept them together .

“Somehow we felt music the same way,” Goodfriend said. “You get together with a group ... if that’s not there, it’s like beating your head against the wall.”

For once his partners in music responded, not with quips, but silent agreement.