

Resident starts late, but becomes a great musician

By Laurie Roemmele-Roberts Correspondent

I grew up in a musical household located in Bloomfield. From the time I turned 7 and my desire to learn the piano was fulfilled, I walked to Orchard Street in town every Saturday morning with my beginner piano books. I rang the doorbell to be greeted by an older woman each week who led me to her wonderful grand piano and to my teacher, Mrs. Alfaro. I eventually discovered that very sweet woman was one of the most sought-after piano teachers in the Metropolitan areas, Isabelle Sant'Ambrogio, fondly known as Mrs. S. I became fascinated by her and was often tickled when she would come in to challenge me, along with Mrs. Alfaro, to work hard because "I had what it took to be a good pianist."

Later on, as I advanced to another one of Mrs. S' students in Verona, Dr. Bill Workinger, I practiced hard and was committed to being the pianist Mrs. S believed I could be at such a young age. It was not long thereafter that I also began to hear of the talented cellist, Mrs. S' son, John Sant'Ambrogio, who, along with his mother, ran a music camp called Red Fox in the beautiful Berkshire Mountains in western Massachusetts, not far from Tanglewood, summer home to the Boston Symphony. I dreamed for years that I would one day attend that camp and, by 1977, I was truly given that honor through the graciousness of Mrs. S and a scholarship she gave to promising but nonaffluent families. She and Mr. Sant'Ambrogio afforded me the opportunity to live and breathe music 24 hours a day on top of a mountain for six weeks with incredible talent from the Boston Symphony and other nationally acclaimed musicians. Most important, it was the chance I got to truly know the Sant'Ambrogio family even better.

More than 30 years later, I reconnected with many people from Red Fox Music Camp through the present day miracle of Facebook, and happily saw John Sant'Ambrogio was also part of our reunited musicians. When he informed us in the early spring that he had a forthcoming book, titled "The Day I Almost Destroyed the Boston Symphony and Other Stories," which included chapters on Red Fox, I could not wait to relive the memories of my childhood.

Mr. Sant'Ambrogio grew up in Bloomfield and attended school here, and it was during his youth that he picked up the cello at almost 15, rather late for many musicians. But with great fervor and determination, Mr. Sant'Ambrogio began a long and incredible journey of success, despite struggle and adversity himself! In a wonderful and spirited conversation with him recently, he spoke to me about his earliest memories of his musical career when he went to one of his first concerts at Newark Symphony Hall where he first heard the Boston Symphony. He also recalled seeing a famous cellist at the PaperMill Playhouse and assured himself that he was willing to work as hard as other musicians to not only "catch up," having started cello so late, but also, to achieve his vision of being an accomplished cellist who would do more than just play in the living rooms of friends and family.

It was not difficult to find inspiration in a musical household, since both of his parents were considered reputable and well-respected musicians in their own right. He also took advantage of the close proximity to New York City, and recalls riding the bus regularly into the City to take lessons from an associate of Pablo Casals, one of the most famous cellists in history. Finally, he made local headlines as a winner of awards at Bloomfield High School and as a lead cellist in the NJ AllState Orchestra.

The book written by Mr. Sant-Ambrogio is certainly autobiographical in nature, telling numerous poignant, humorous, and inspirational stories of his experiences as a cellist in the Boston Symphony Orchestra, as well as more than 30 years in the role of principal cellist in another nationally acclaimed orchestra, the St. Louis Symphony. There is an amazing level of humility and honesty, as well as motivational messages all of us can gain from reading these stories.

Of course, musicians and other artists will truly be entertained and inspired, and I admit to my laughing hysterically in reading chapters of Red Music Camp which I attended, and Mr. Sant'Ambrogio and his mother directed. There were behind-the-scenes of camp experiences, but also of moments in his symphony orchestra career that most of us would never know as audience members.

I also was fascinated and most intrigued by his experiences in the 7th Army Symphony. Needless to say, it was just after the Korean War and in a recovering Europe following World War II, a challenging era indeed. Once again, even a nonmusician would appreciate John Sant'Ambrogio's service through music to his country. He tells the story of being a "soldier," but even more magnificent, how his music and talent offered respite and joy to many soldiers and officers during a turbulent time and to the citizens of Europe who were so touched to see soldiers in army uniforms performing Beethoven and Brahms in their concert halls.

The most profound part of my conversation with Mr. Sant'Ambrogio was his declaration that he wanted to bring out three messages in his book, and through his use of short stories and anecdotes, he is successful in proclaiming those messages: 1. To bring forth the message that the Symphony Orchestra cannot die. Through his book and his present endeavors — particularly speaking and playing his cello to young people — he hopes that he will have an impact on getting more young people to support the symphony orchestra; attend concerts; listen to its music; and appreciate how much the orchestra has contributed to the arts in this country and throughout the world. He hopes that those in leadership will facilitate an evolution of sorts whereby the orchestra can survive.

Today, many symphony orchestras are declaring bankruptcy and experiencing low attendance. The orchestra, with his efforts and those like his, can bring this powerful message to the youth of today and introduce them to an incredible — albeit unfamiliar — form

of music that can bring great joy. But, he warns, we must be create interest and show them that music has an amazing value to their lives.

2. To emphasize the value of music and its relationship to learning.

Certainly, we moms might have purchased numerous videos for our children that support research correlating music and brain development. My own personal experience with my own children validates that phenomenon, but Mr. Sant'Ambrogio wants to really showcase the evidence that comes from children's exposure to the music of the symphony orchestra.

3. To never, never, ever give up! Mr. Sant'Ambrogio certainly demonstrates his disadvantage as a beginner cellist at almost 15. For a musician, he started very late, and was sometimes discouraged by others. He says, "My message is to keep on going, persist, love what you are doing. Don't listen to others who might tell you, 'You can't do it.' Instead, hold on to your dreams and find resilience to keep on going. I believe that is how I was able to achieve my own dreams as a musician and the incredible career I had!"

In essence, "The Day I Almost Destroyed the Boston Symphony and Other Stories," through its humor, recounting of success and failure, simply shows how the symphony orchestra is, in fact, a metaphor of life, as he explains. He examines how there were only three women in the most prominent orchestra of 1959. That has changed to more than 50 percent today. His stories support how in life, the significance of persistence, despite negativity and obstacles in our way. Finally, he describes what really is the message of one of his best stories and how he "almost destroyed the Boston Symphony."

Mr. Sant'Ambrogio explains when you don't listen to everyone in the orchestra, including the hands of the conductor, when you don't consider everyone with whom you are working, you will indeed not be successful. His own early experience in the cello section demonstrated clearly how the cellos have to listen and work together and with the violins, the flutes, the percussion ... and on and on ... to create a masterpiece.

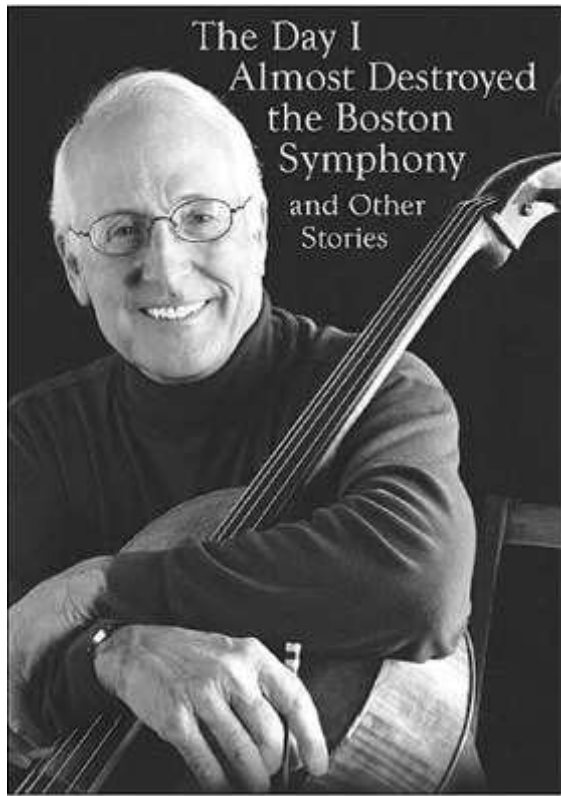
As in life, we must work together, sometimes giving, sometimes taking, but always listening, selfexamining ... and even without agreement, we can find common ground as is the case of the orchestra ... all along, we audience members don't know there might be internal conflict, disagreement and lack of consensus before we enter the auditorium. So it is truly amazing when so many musicians can come together and communicate the wonder of the music they are performing ... but it only happens through listening and collaboration.

"The Day I Almost Destroyed the Boston Symphony and Other Stories" reflects a long, illustrious career that is still not over, as Mr. Sant'Ambrogio is still active as a master teacher, principal cellist of the Steamboat Springs, Colorado Orchestra, and motivational speaker to youth around the country. He has assured all of us seeking any passion to move towards our goals and our dreams to do whatever it takes to get to that special life in our respective lives.

I am grateful to Mr. Sant'Ambrogio and his mother for their ability to assist me in my youth coming from very modest means to see the world of music and the arts; to enable me to reach for my goals in music and my own career; and to now, through this inspirational book, share a wonderful message to all of those who can envision a dream to keep moving towards it, no matter what.

Laurie Roemmele-Roberts grew up in Bloomfield. She is the president of PEQ Inc., a fundraising/ grant writing consultancy since 1990 to nonprofit organizations.

A seasoned pianist, she continues to support and love the symphony orchestra, and is ecstatic that her two sons have entered the music arena exploring several instruments, including the piano, trombone, and cello. She lives in northern New Jersey with her husband, two young sons, and several musical instruments.



'The Day I Almost Destroyed the Boston Symphony and Other Stories,' by Laurie Roemmele-Roberts, describes John Sant'Ambrogio's growth from an adolescent to a renowned musician.

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