

The Soiva International Music Camp

A Finnish incubator of adolescent virtuoso musical performers

by John Bechtel

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What do musicians Karl Swenson from Kindred, North Dakota, Eliza and Emilia Folkert, Polish-Americans from Atlanta, Georgia, and Alexandra Sadik-Ogli from St. Petersburg, Russia all have in common?

Karl Swenson started writing music at age 3, and had written eight symphonies by age 11. Today, Karl at 15 writes commissioned works and has his own music publishing company.

Alexandra Sadik-Ogli, at 15, studies piano at a Conservatory in St. Petersburg, Russia and has recorded several pieces on YouTube.

Eliza and Emilia Folkert, at 17 and 16 respectively, were both instructed on piano by their distinguished concert pianist father, have won many awards for their performances, and are due to perform at Carnegie Hall in mid-September. [See separate article]

Apart from the obvious, that they are virtuosos or even child prodigies, they have all attended and been mentored at the Soiva International Music Camp, a unique incubator of exceptional musical talent based on world-renowned Finnish educational principles of pedagogy.

When “first-time” students arrive at Camp, they are asked to play a short audition so that the teachers know where to place them based on their level of expertise and technique. Roughly half of each class, both students and faculty, are Finnish, and at the beginning of the improvisation program the Finns are over here in the room, and everyone else is over there, and you might wonder how this is going to work out. However, this is not your ordinary music class. The student-to-faculty ratio is 3:1 and under expert and dynamic leadership they are quickly drawn into acts of creation working side by side, exchanging ideas,



Dennis Anderson and partner Melodee Bahr, Soiva’s dynamic co-directors.

and developing the self-confidence to make the myriads of quick decisions necessary to musical improvisation.

Trained to play their instruments but not necessarily create, through team effort they experience the dawn of recognition of bringing something new into existence.

Conceived in New York City in 2007, and first implemented in 2008, the program struggled for three years and closed its doors in 2011. A committee of former teachers along with Jeanne Doty, a trustee of the Finlandia Foundation National (FFN) reassessed the situation. They moved the location to Concordia College, in Moorhead, Minnesota, eliminated the busing of students, and cut the tuition almost in half.

Jeanne Doty resigned from the FFN Board and asked Dennis Anderson to seek election to the Board. He was elected in April of 2011. Melodee, as Dennis’ partner, volunteered to be a co-director. They reopened in 2012 with twelve students, then 21 in 2013, and

34 students in both 2014 and 2015.

In 2016, they moved the school for the first time to Finland, with 18 students from Finland and 18 from the U.S. Appropriately enough, the temporary campus was held at a Sibelius Academy near Jarvenpaa, Finland.

Back in the U.S. for 2017, Soiva had 28 students and 33 this year, 2018. Next year, the program moves back to Finland as perhaps the world’s first experimental pop-up musical camp.

Dennis says they have capped participation at 40 students in Finland and the U.S. because of space limitations, but it is also Soiva’s intent to retain the intimacy and intensity of the experience for the students.

The students get to know and befriend one another and continue their cultural exchange of music and friendship year-after-year between the U.S. and Finland. Students can enter the program at 11 years and can return each year through age 19. There are often tears when they part ways.

An annual grant from FFN plus tuition revenues cover the costs of running the program. They expect the 2019 program in Finland to be an early sellout.

Dennis and Melodee

Dennis and Melodee are two of the liveliest octogenarians you are ever likely to meet. They are both people to whom you would instantly entrust your children, both regarding safety and education. Although the school is open for only ten days in the summer, it is a year-long project, and this couple generously donates their time and energies as unpaid co-directors.

Dennis is 3rd-generation Finnish, and he grew up on a dairy farm in New York Mills, part of the “Finnish Triangle” in West Central Minnesota with other Finnish communities like Sebeka, Menahga, and Wolf Lake. After retiring from his profession of financial management in the banking industry,



Soiva Music Camp students and faculty, class of 2018. Seated, front and center, are Melodee Bahr and Dennis Anderson.



Orchestra practice for Soiva International Music Camp students. Inset: Minna Thrall, student, who shares, “... one of the most beautiful things on earth: music! Because of this camp I have a whole new appreciation for music and the violin.”

Dennis became a trustee of FFN and a member of the Soiva “revival team.”

Thoroughly Finnish, Dennis tells the story of how his mother and father would sit beside each other at church every Sunday. This was unusual because the men were supposed to sit on one side of the church and the women on the other side. When challenged about breaking the rules, Dennis’s mother retorted “If I’m good enough to sleep with him, I’m good enough to sit beside him.” As a side note to this story, Melodee added that the reason for the seating arrangement

at church was that the men had to work in the dairy barns before church, and they tended to smell of barn. Moreover, dairy cattle don’t recognize any known Sabbath, so chores had to be done Sunday like every other day.

Melodee’s recent DNA test indicated that she is Lithuanian, Scandinavian and part Finnish descent.

Growing up in New York City, she was born with an outsized voice and could sing before she could speak. Her uncle, who was a stage performer himself, would get her little gigs, starting at the age of three, because



Finnish composer Markus Fagerudd and Melodee at the UniArts University in Helsinki. She taught Broadway music to students there in March 2016. Fagerudd has taught Soiva students composition and improvisation over the past several years.

of her “adult” voice. In time she tried opera (too structured), Broadway (not her passion), and then discovered jazz, which for her was all about the heart.

She has performed in a number of countries including Italy, Germany, and Israel. At a very young 80 years old, she still loves the stage and will be performing in Port St. Lucie, Florida, this November. She has taught Broadway to students in Helsinki.

Dennis and Melodee are devoted to the Camp; they love the students and the way they learn from each other. Every day of the event begins at 9 a.m. in a room with a whiteboard with a word or two of Finnish on it. At the very least, every non-Finnish student will understand *sauna* and *sisu*.