

# The Hills Are Alive

## High Peaks Festival draws music students from around the world

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From the popular “Close Encounters With Music” series or his weekly “Classical Music According to Yehuda” program on WAMC radio, area music lovers are familiar with renowned cellist Yehuda Hanani. His is such a strong presence in our cultural landscape that we should not be surprised that his passion for musical outreach is yet another educational initiative as his **High Peaks Music Festival** takes up residence at the Berkshire School in Sheffield.

The festival’s name is a play on words, riffing off both the mountains in which it takes place and the pinnacles of experience it offers for everybody it touches: faculty, students, and audience.

“As in Iceland or Scandinavia, where the sun never sets, there is an incredible amount of energy and stimulation,” Hanani says in describing the festival’s atmosphere. By listening to and playing music, he says, one gets “the lesson in life to listen to one another. Let’s see what you have to say. When you’re playing chamber music, it is very intimate friends engaged in an important conversation.”

So, why did Hanani relocate the music festival to the Berkshires after eight idyllic years in the Catskills? He admits that it was so beautiful, “you could have sworn you were in Switzerland. But Berkshire people who make the trek to the Catskills were lamenting the fact that we weren’t closer by.”

The festival, which runs August 6-16, offers instruction to conservatory and post-conservatory musicians from around the world from some of the music world’s leading lights. Students from China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Holland, Ukraine, Mexico, Israel, and the U.S. will be converging in Sheffield. They perform for six nights of the festival, with faculty performances on August 11 and 14.

This year’s festival will center on the French-Russian connection and will include lectures open to the public designed to explore the history, art, literature and, of course, the music of the two nations. Faculty and students come from around the world, with a dazzling array of backgrounds and musical interests. One prominent faculty member is violinist Peter Zazofsky. Now in his fourth year of teaching at High Peaks, he was born to a musical family. (His father was assistant concertmaster of the Boston Symphony

Orchestra.) Although he started taking piano lessons at age five, “I retired at age six,” he jokes. “I wanted to play the violin. I liked the sound that my dad made. He had a beautiful tone.”

At the time, he thought of his lessons as “just a game. I was not agile, I was not graceful. I didn’t have a good feel for the instrument—how to hold it.” His first teacher was none other than the legendary Joseph Silverstein. Unfortunately, the renowned violinist “had no idea how to deal with a beginner, so my parents finally decided we’ve got to do something.” They met Ivan Galamian, described by *The Strad* magazine as “perhaps the greatest teacher the string world will ever know,” and under his tutelage, Zazofsky says, “I had to undo bad habits. With bad habits you can’t go forward.” While his fellow students were playing Mozart, he was relearning his scales.

Apparently, he learned them well enough to participate in competitions, which is how he met Hanani.

“Yehuda had a series of concerts in Miami,” where, says Zazofsky, his father was a professor at the University of Miami. “He wanted me to play these concerts. He had this brilliant idea of Close Encounters already in the early ’80s, doing these concerts with notes of historical interest so that it wasn’t just going to the concert and reading the program notes.”

Through his *Close Encounters With Music*, Hanani presents thematic concerts of chamber music with commentary to enrich the concert experience. The idea of having an academy grew out of this concert series.

And, as a natural outgrowth of his life as a professor at Boston University and BU’s Tanglewood Institute, Zazofsky joined the High Peaks faculty.

Mikael Darmanie is a quintessential product of High Peaks, having grown from student to teacher at the festival. Raised in the Caribbean, his parents believed that he needed culture in his life, so at the age of 12 he began to study piano. At 14, Darmanie had an experience that determined that music would be his life.

“It was very sudden. Hearing Chopin’s Nocturne in E flat major op. 9 no. 2 had a profound impact on the way I viewed classical music. This instrumental piano music without words, context, or meaning somehow conjured up feelings of nostalgia, melancholy, joy, bliss, and more. I was hooked,” says Darmanie.

He studied under Hanani at the University of Cincinnati and, while working as a piano-performance assistant with string instrumentalists, absorbed his teacher’s philosophy of collaboration as opposed to accompanying. Darmanie then spent time at High Peaks as a student. “I really enjoyed his coaching. This is a real musician, a real thinker, a genuine artist.” And, “He liked my playing.”

Thus, the student became a teacher.

“I love teaching,” he says. “I wish I could do much more of it.” Although with a performance schedule that includes nine to ten months of travel every year, that isn’t likely to happen soon.

For more information on the Berkshire High Peaks Festival and to purchase tickets, go to [berkshirehighpeaksmusic.org](http://berkshirehighpeaksmusic.org).