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The Ricochet Duo
— Rose Chancler on
piano and Jane Boxall
on marimba (photo by
Laura Sells-Doyle).

A Day in the Life

The Ricochet Duo pays tribute to the life and
work of acclaimed environmentalist Anne
LaBastille and her beloved Adirondacks with a
concert of new music at LPCA.

By Benjamin Pomerance

It was the dogs who introduced them. On a dirt road near Wadhams, NY, a German shepherd and a Lab-shepherd mix encountered one another for the first time. The shepherd was Krispy, named after the Krispy Kreme doughnut chain. The mixed-breed dog was Elvis. They became fast friends.

Their owners took slightly longer. Elvis came with Rose Chancler, a classically trained pianist with a Master's degree from the Eastman School of Music. Krispy came with Anne LaBastille, a devout conservationist who conversed with birds, wrote iconic books, and wielded an impressive nickname: "The Woodswoman of the Adirondacks."

They weren't exactly carbon copies of one another. The many years that separated their ages was only the beginning. Chancler is outgoing and ebullient. LaBastille guarded her privacy. Chancler had spent virtually her entire life as a pianist. LaBastille, notwithstanding the fact that her mother was a concert pianist, didn't really care for piano music.

Even so, it was the start of a beautiful friendship. Once Chancler gained LaBastille's trust, the two women became close. There were long walks through the forests that LaBastille knew with photographic precision. There were long talks at each other's homes, conversations that meandered like the streams that LaBastille cherished. Neither of them fully grasped the professional accomplishments of the other. It didn't matter. Their companionship was really all either one of them truly wanted.

That's why, when LaBastille passed away in 2011, her absence besieged Chancler. Over the prior couple of years, she had watched her resilient friend physically deteriorate,

as if pieces of a puzzle were being removed one by one. Now, she was afraid that nobody would replace those pieces, leaving this life's picture eternally incomplete. When she actually sat down and read some of LaBastille's books cover to cover, her concern deepened. Something needed to be said to keep those words vital and the legacy of a woman at home in her environment alive.

Eventually, she decided to say it with the language that she knows best. And on Sunday, August 17, when Ricochet Duo — Chancler on piano, Jane Boxall on marimba — presents "The Woodswoman Project" at the Lake Placid Center for the Arts, they'll be faced with a daunting task: describing a multi-faceted trailblazer without speaking. Music will be their primary tool. Photographs will supplement the melodies and harmonies. Depicting an ideal day in LaBastille's life will be their goal.

Four elements will be the points on their compass. Water is one of them, honoring LaBastille's crusade to keep Adirondack water safe to drink. Silence is another, celebrating the conservationist's love of listening to nature, staying quiet and learning from the organic music around her. Wilderness is a third, remembering LaBastille's passion for the trees. "When my husband first met her," Chancler recalls, "she made him go into the middle of her yard and hug her maple tree. That was just her way."

And then there are the birds. "She could talk to birds," Chancler says. "I saw her do it more than once."

That's how this program starts — with the birds. A solo piano transcription of Mikhail Glinka's "The Lark," beginning with the theater in total darkness, represents the morning's sunrise. As the lights come on, bird calls will



Composter William Pfaff (photo by Samantha Ritter).

sound from Chancler's piano. Another piece later in the program, Guatemalan composer Jesus Castillo's "Fiesta de Pajaros," will again turn the hall into an aviary. "Yes, it's a little schmaltzy," the pianist laughs. "But it's so sweet."

The evening's centerpiece comes from three world premieres for piano and marimba, all of them commissioned by Chancler. One of the new works, created by Minnesota resident Doug Opal, pays homage to that first meeting between Chancler and LaBastille. Titled "Playtime with Elvis and Krispy," it memorializes the encounter on that trail near Wadhams that gave both dogs and their owners a new companion. The entire thing is laced with tonal images of canines frisking about in the woods. "I was practicing the piece," Chancler says, "and suddenly my young daughter said, 'Oh — which one of you is Elvis and which one of you is Krispy? So she had the whole thing figured out even before I did.'"

SUNY Plattsburgh music composition professor William Pfaff's contribution shifts the attention to the vegetable and mineral kingdoms and to the colors that

spring from both. Titled "Lichen," the work's message is an imperative one: keep on changing. Unexpected shifts create novel hues and textures, much of it related to the song of the white-throated sparrow but never parroting that song literally. It's the way that LaBastille seemed to live her life, one quest unfolding into another naturally. New adventures and new lessons informed her future. Like the explorations within this music, though, she never passed through a prior pursuit the same way twice.

The third premiere, Adirondack composer Hilary Tann's "Solstice," provides the most direct interpretation of LaBastille's work. Using one passage from each book of LaBastille's four-volume autobiography, Tann developed a musical life cycle, traveling from the ice breaking in the summer to the waterways freezing in winter and back again. "If you close your eyes," Chancler says, "you can see nature from this music. So many things that were so important to Anne — the white pines, the kestrel flying into the wind — become vivid and lifelike in this piece."

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Such vibrancy flows from other selections on this program, too, like “Wind Across Mountains,” designed by marimba master Keiko Abe, and “Morning Clouds,” a flowing, evocative work by Nils Rohwer and Jens Schiecker. Yet the concert also has a pensive side, a warning to treasure finite things while they last. Gareth Farr’s “Tuatara” describes a species of bird that became extinct. Rain Worthington’s “On Curious Reflection” and Akemi Naito’s “Memory of Woods” are intimate reflections on life itself.

At some point during the concert, the music will stop entirely. Photos of LaBastille and her favorite Adirondack haunts will appear on a screen. The audience will watch in silence, the ambient sounds of the hall forming a composition of their own.

And even after the lights go down for the final time, dropping the theatre into darkness again while Chancler plays the fading final notes of Charles Griffes’s “The Lake at Evening,” the pianist has no intention of stopping here. Already, she has found other venues that want Ricochet Duo to

present this program next year. She wants to keep performing it long after that, too.

“When [LaBastille] died, I was afraid that what she had done would go by the wayside,” Chancler explains. “I think I was wrong about that, and I’m glad. But I want to do my part. I want to continue her message as much as I can.”

It’s hard to wordlessly convey the message of a woman whose words about nature made her famous. Still, it seems that Ricochet Duo has managed to do precisely that, exalting the legacy of Anne LaBastille and, at least for one evening, helping an audience see — through their music — the Adirondack forests and waterways that she loved so dearly.

Ricochet Duo presents “The Woodswoman Project” on Sunday, August 17, at 7:30 p.m. at the Lake Placid Center for the Arts, 17 Algonquin Drive. Tickets are \$10 in advance and \$15 at the door. For reservations and more information, please call (518) 523-2512 or visit www.lakeplacidarts.org.

Noted Adirondack author and conservationist Anne LaBastille, with Condor and Chekika (photo courtesy of the Anne LaBastille estate).

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