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OF SOUNDS
AND SILENCE

Piano By Nature presents
a musical tribute to
Anne LaBastille

Rose Chancler
at the piano with
Jane Boxall on
marimba.

Photo: Laura Sells Doyle.



Of Sounds And Silence

Piano By Nature presents a musical
tribute to Anne LaBastille

By Benjamin Pomerance

Elulogizing any human being is a tall order, and understanding a legend is almost impossible. Too many things become bound up in knots through the years, realities blending with perceptions until everything ends up hazy. Then you remove words entirely, as the Ricochet Duo — pianist Rose Chancler and marimba player Jane Boxall — will do in Elizabethtown concerts honoring Anne LaBastille, and the job winds up looking downright Herculean.

Out of solitude, LaBastille found so many answers, or at least the gumption to ask the questions. She could shout from the rooftops if she had to, and she often had to. But she could always escape, returning to the land that would swathe her in peace.

That's why the Elizabethtown concerts include a moment where the two musicians will pause completely,

not making a sound while Adirondack photographs scroll on a screen. "In short, silence puts us in our place," LaBastille wrote in 1997. "It makes humans humble and reverent."

Ironical, then, that humans kept asking her to speak. Everyone demanded a word from this prophet of the wild. She poured out millions of words on her typewriter for them — more than 150 magazine articles, two dozen scientific papers, and 16 books, led by her bestselling multi-volume *Woodswoman* series — and still they called for more.

"She was a very open writer, and people liked that," explains John Davis, an Adirondack-based naturalist and former *Wild Earth* magazine editor. "Plus, people saw her as the real thing — building her own cabin, cutting her own firewood — and they wanted to know just how she did it."

She used a pseudonym in her books for the isolated lake near which she lived, trying to maintain some separation, but people found her anyway. They showed up seeking

autographs, advice, even her hand in marriage. Usually, she answered them cordially. She was a trained ecologist, but she could slather on makeup and braid her blonde hair into pigtails and hold court at a reception or a book signing with panache.

Which is why a public concert just might be the perfect tribute. From a scholar's perspective, LaBastille's specialized missions in remote areas left the greatest imprint. Yet her most important gift may have involved working among the general public, educating laypeople about her field of study. "Anne was no hermit," Davis states. "Actually, part of her power was creating a mystique about her life. She created a persona for herself."

Thus, an event illustrating her teachings to the masses through music and photography likely would have received LaBastille's blessing. The nuances of Ricochet Duo's program wouldn't have hurt their cause, either. By trying to musically reconstruct a day in her life, the two

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Anne LaBastille at Covewood Lodge, Big Moose Lake in the Adirondacks, April 2000.

Photo: Ken Rimany

musicians developed a sonic scrapbook of the woodswoman's favorite things.

Birds — Chancler says that she witnessed LaBastille communicating with the feathered creatures more than once — are represented by Mikhail Glinka's "The Lark" and Jesus Castillo's "Fiesta de Pajaros," and by Plattsburgh composer William Pfaff's "Lichen," which studies the white-throated sparrow's song. Water's life cycle, from spring's thaws to winter's freezing, emerges in Adirondack writer Hilary Tann's "Solstice." The sunsets that LaBastille described with imagistic prose appear in Charles Griffes's "The Lake At Evening."

Marimba luminary Keiko Abe's "Wind Across Mountains" evokes openness, emblematic of LaBastille's need for vast, unspoiled spaces. "Morning Clouds," an impressionistic creation by Jens Schliecker and Nils Rohwer, recognizes nature's pulse and flow. Akemi Naito's "Memory of Woods" looks through multiple lenses at the fragility of land and time.

Minnesota resident Doug Opel's contribution sets a more lighthearted theme.

Titled "Playtime with Elvis and Krispy," it's the story of a German shepherd and a Lab-shepherd mix meeting on a trail near the community of Wadhams. Krispy Kreme, the German shepherd, belonged to LaBastille, one of many members of this breed whom she lived with and adored. Elvis, the other canine, belonged to Chancler.

The dogs became companions instantly. Their owners eventually followed suit. Neither Chancler nor LaBastille fully grasped the scope of the other person's professional accomplishments at the time, and it didn't matter. For whom they were, not for what they did, the pianist and the conservationist remained friends.

And although silence nourished her, LaBastille also thrived on these secure friendships. Ask enough people, and stories begin emerging like owls at dusk, each one revealing some special interaction between the ecologist and another individual. Doris Herwig, a tour planner and licensed New York State Outdoor Guide, owns enough of these tales to fill a book.

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They aren't just chronicles of lakes and woodlands, either. Like LaBastille, Herwig treasures the outdoors. Yet nature was never the capstone of their bond. Instead, they enjoyed gossiping for endless hours about clothes, hairstyles, boyfriends and husbands — “giggling and laughing as girls do,” Herwig remembers. These talks characterized the “sisterhood” that they shared for decades.

She remembers meeting LaBastille for the first time, a 45-year-old reminiscence remaining as fresh as the morning sky. “There she was, driving a rickety old white truck which definitely needed much motor repair,” Herwig recalls. “In the passenger seat was a German shepherd — Pitzzi, who always smiled. And out jumped ‘Daisy Mae,’ dressed in very short shorts with ragged edges over very skinny legs, a flowered puffy-sleeved blouse, blonde pigtails flying, bare feet — but with very red polished toes — and the biggest smile you ever saw.”

One evening, when her job's pressures became oppressive, Herwig traveled to LaBastille's home. After dinner, they hiked into the woods to howl for wolves. “Silently, we set up night camp and waited,” Herwig remembers. “We could hear them in the distance. Then we howled. They answered. That sound can only be described as a spine-tingling and deeply emotional experience that few people in the world have ever had.”

And of all the people in the world, it's hard to believe that the whole adventure was instigated by someone whose New Jersey upbringing showed her few green spaces beyond golf courses. LaBastille's father was a language professor. Her mother was a pianist who allegedly told the young LaBastille that girls didn't go camping. She had no siblings. She went to college at Cornell, earning her bachelor's degree in conservation of natural resources.

As a graduate student in the late 1950s, she made the first of many trips to Guatemala's Lake Atitlán, studying several species — particularly the giant grebe, a flightless bird that is now extinct. She spent summers working at an Adirondack lodge on Big Moose Lake. Eventually, she married the lodge's owner.

Their marriage ended after seven years, with no children. Needing something to hold onto, she bought 22 acres of secluded Adirondack land, and with the help of two carpenters, she built that now-celebrated cabin next to Twitchell Lake. Four years after that, she earned her doctorate in wildlife ecology from Cornell. She also worked as a guide, leading visitors throughout the 6-million-acre Adirondack Park, co-mingling storytelling and science.

In the '70s, she brought that blend of nature and narrative to paper. Her first book, *Woodswoman*, hit the shelves in 1976, telling about the existence she had built. That was when her immortality began. Readers couldn't get enough of this 5-foot-1-inch woman's real-life natural world immersion. By the time of LaBastille's death, that inaugural volume alone had sold more than 100,000 copies.

There was no going back from fame. She was “the woodswoman” now. Inspired people were suddenly staring at her, seeking guidance from their newfound guide. So she gave them a truckload of writings — some autobiographical, others more subject-specific, including a pioneering study about acid rain in the Adirondacks. She served as an ecological consultant across the U.S. and abroad. She became an Adirondack Park Agency commissioner, one of the organization's most consistent pro-conservation voters during the 17 years that she served.

Honors gushed in like a springtime river. The Explorer's Club made her the first female recipient of their Citation of Merit. The Society of Women Geographers awarded her a gold medal. In 2008, she received the Howard Zahniser Adirondack Award from the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks. And there were many more.

If only things were exclusively so rosy. Yet her work provoked darker reactions, too. Some people accused her of embellishment. Others attacked her. “Fear was always in her life,” Herwig says. “In the Adirondacks, her barn was burned to the ground by environmental adversaries. She lectured at a college, after which the bush people came after her, and she and Zandor, yet another German shepherd, spent the night hiding in a

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swamp until the men left. Fear, always fear. But she was a strong woman who believed in her calling and stood up to anything that came her way.”

Until one thing came that the woodswoman couldn't defeat. Alzheimer's disease forced her away from nature during her final years. On July 1, 2011, she passed away in a Plattsburgh nursing home. That week, articles about her ran in newspapers from New York City to Los Angeles.

She understood death. Over and over again, she had watched cycles change and renew. “Life seems to have no beginning and no ending,” she observed in her first *Woodswoman* book. “Only the steady expansion of trunk and root, the slow pileup of duff and debris, the lap of water before it becomes ice, the patter of raindrops before they turn to snowflakes. Then the chirp of a swallow winging over the lake reminds me that there is always a new beginning.”

And to those championing her memory, such beginnings are everywhere. “The problems Anne warned about have not been solved,” Davis states. “The pleas she made for conservation are at least as pressing now as they were when she worked and wrote. As long as people are joining the effort to solve these problems, Anne will be very much alive.”

“Her values were pretty simple,” Herwig says. “Watch what you are doing, take care of the environment as there is only one, enjoy the great outdoors while you are on this earth, and help others to learn and do what is right.”

Perhaps it really is impossible to piece together the entire puzzle of Anne LaBastille. At once, she could be so many things: scientist, author, crusader, friend. Celebrity, extravert, scholar, solitude-seeker — just to start the list. Yet in the end, this opens the avenues by which one can remember who she was and what her messages continue to be. Even when such a tribute comes from music, the human-made spaces of sounds and silence used to honor a woman who knew these contrasts in the world around her, and understood the truest meaning of both.

Ricochet Duo presents their tribute to Anne LaBastille on January 31 at 7 p.m., with a pre-concert talk about Anne LaBastille at 5:30 p.m., and February 1 at 3 p.m. in the Hand House on River Street in Elizabethtown. For tickets and more information, call (518) 962-2949 or visit www.pianobynature.org.