

# Bach-Packing, or Carrying Music to New Heights

By JOURDAN HOUSTON

Mr. WASHINGTON, N. H. They walked through a white cloud, their instruments protected from the moisture by large garbage bags. In the wooden shelter ahead of them a crowd in attire ranging from J. C. Penney undershirts to Abercrombie windbreakers straddled benches and pressed for space around the potbelly stove to watch the six arrivals loosen their boots and tighten their bows. As the wideboard pine walls of the small commonroom began to resound to the first bars of Vivaldi's Concerto for Sopranina, Op. 44, No. 11, weary hikers emerging from timberline imagined they were hearing piccolo and strings on the slopes of 6,288-foot Mt. Washington, tallest peak in the Northeast. They were.

For eight days this summer, in the northern New Hampshire range known as the Presidentials, an energetic clutch of professional musicians rigged their pack frames to accommodate cello, bassoon and more manageable strings and woodwinds, and trekked for as much as six hours daily to perform at mountain shelters maintained for rugged climbers by the Appalachian Mountain Club. They called themselves the Hutband. With a repertoire of 29 chamber works, these members of the 23-year-old New Hampshire Music Festival were intent on carrying classical music to new heights.

So on a clear day a few weeks ago I assembled bandages, a change of socks and shirt, bug repellent, and a pair of newly broken-in boots and went Bach-packing with the Hutband to outlying cabins with names like Mizpah and Greenleaf. If music is the poor man's Parnassus, as Emerson fancied, would taking chamber music to mountaintops, where Nature has designed her own song, prove redundant? Or could music composed by urban men for urbane people take on a new dimension on these silent peaks? In other words, would Mozart and Vivaldi, Stamitz and Scarlatti play in the Presidentials?

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They did. I've rarely relished chamber music more than in those simple wooden refuges.

Why? Consider the environment of the low-altitude chamber concert. It exists in an atmosphere of propriety, musical savvy and a sense of squeaky-clean. The halls seem sterile; the musicians seem remote. Mother always taught us that people attending chamber concerts never sweat, take off their shoes, clap wildly or whistle.

But on a mountaintop, protocol is *comme on veut*, not *comme il faut*. Decorum capitulates to the code of the trails, a democracy where bank presidents and plumbers, equally exhausted and exhilarated by their climbs, are peers. When chamber music goes aloft, it is stripped of stylized etiquettes.

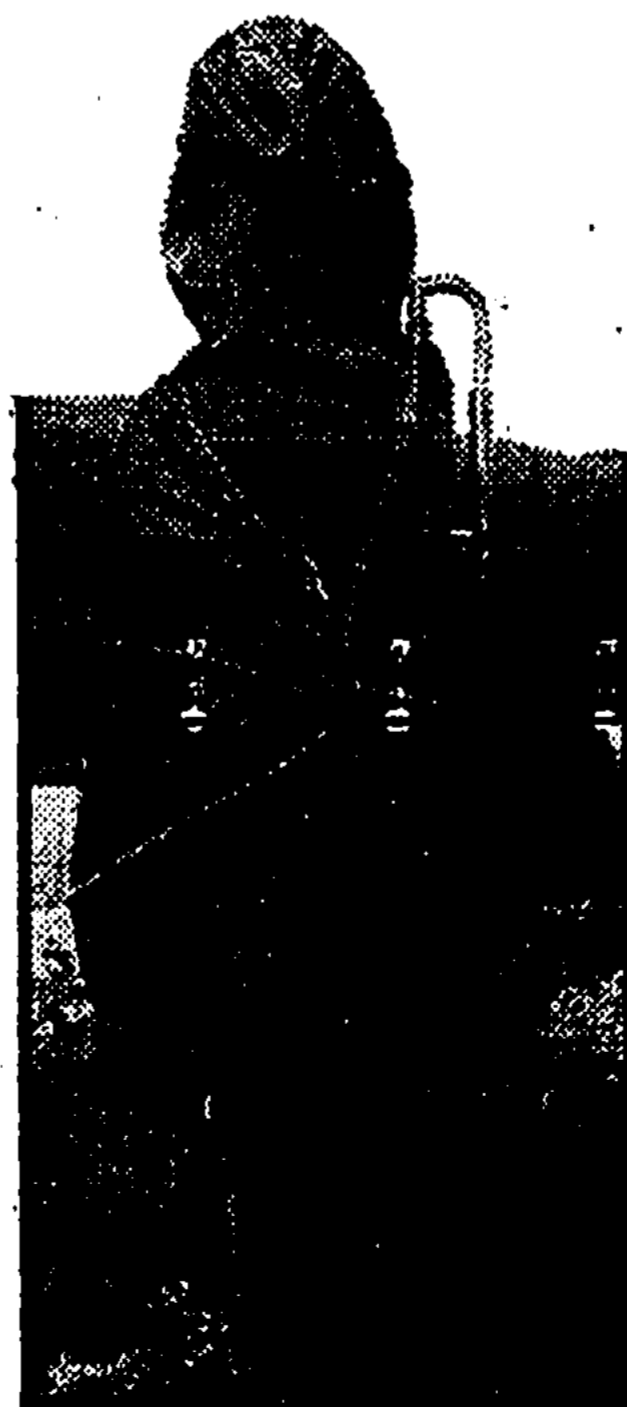
Now we are at a hut known as Lonesome Lake, waiting for a concert. The musicians, who have been warming up in their bunk rooms, enter with their instruments—cello, violin, viola, bassoon, clarinet and flute. In a few days, an oboe and second violin will be added when two more Festival members climb to join them. Their regimen here is similar to

that throughout their tour: a concert at 4 P.M. lasts until the dinner of Paul Bunyan portions prepared by the college-age, co-ed staff, who must carry all staples aloft daily on oversized pack frames. Then, as most of the hut's four or five dozen guests settle outdoors to watch the sunset, the musicians scatter to hillsides—or, at Lonesome Lake, to boats—to play Telemann canons in the twilight.

Tonight, there is laughter when violinist Myron Nelson of the New Orleans Symphony enters with black tie above his T-shirt. The Hutband opens with the "Brandenburg" Concerto No. 2; the second movement is interrupted briefly when Patrick Simpson, cellist and professor at Virginia Polytechnical Institute, confronts the ubiquitous local insect known simply as a "black fly." It bites.

If you were bringing chamber music to a mountain, what scores would you stuff in your pack? The Hutband's 29-piece repertoire ranged from Orlando Gibbons's four fantasies for strings to Shostakovich's polka from the "Age of Gold." Adaptability is part of mountain life, and

When music goes to the mountains, conventional concert etiquette is left down below.



the Hutband rearranged deftly in the face of missing instruments. So, in the woodwind-rich Shostakovich polka, viola assumed the horn part and the violin took over for the oboe. A bassoon became a cello in a Stamitz quartet for clarinet and strings, and the clarinet played second viola for the Vivaldi Op. 44, "one of our least arranged arrangements."

Other pieces included the "Pastorales" of Vincent Persichetti and Scarlatti; a pair of Keller and Poulenc clarinet and bassoon duos; Grieg's "Nocturne"; Haydn's "London" Trio with flute, clarinet and bassoon; Weber's Concertino, and, for comic relief, a brave rendition of the "Carmen" Suite, with some Scott Joplin encores for the boot-stomper.

The technical difficulties of playing on a mountaintop affect wind players in particular; breath becomes short as the altitude change approaches a mile. All the musicians noticed a temporary swelling and stiffness of the fingers, caused by the tourniquet effect of the backpack straps during a climb. During performances outdoors, insects distract them, and a sudden wind can scat-

ter their scores. Inside, the opening of doors admits cold air to the warm room, noticeably altering the instruments' intonation.

Why do these Bach-packers do it? For one thing, they realize that their enthusiastic reception by the hikers, who come from all parts of the country, provides publicity for the New Hampshire Music Festival, which came very near its demise last winter for lack of funds. (Probably the only unenthusiastic observer was Meldrim Thomson, New Hampshire's governor, who threatened to withdraw a state grant to the Festival until he was assured that the Hutband was not receiving any of the \$10,000 subsidy.)

But there are less practical considerations, too. Flutist Leone Buyse sat on a boulder near timberline, that sudden arrival of rock that means the trees are all behind one and the rare Alpine vegetation begins. "There are no distractions," she said. "You have nothing with you, really—you know, just two dollars and that's it. I find playing music here more pleasurable than anywhere else. It's a very strange thing, but it's like the essence of chamber music." ■