



# THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Heart of Chamber Music Institute celebrates  
10 years of connecting music makers

BY HEATHER K. SCOTT



GILLIAN ROGELL: Passionate about her musical philosophies.

**M**y goal in life is to change the world a tiny bit for the better," says Gillian Rogell, founder and director of the Heart of Chamber Music Institute (HCM) in Boston, Massachusetts. Rogell is soft spoken, but passionate and articulate about her musical philosophies. Her techniques have been called both conceptual and practical, and she came to find them not just through rigorous study, but also by overcoming challenges in her life.

It hasn't been an easy road. The death of Rogell's husband in 1997 set the violist and chamber-music player adrift. "I was trying to figure out what to do with my life, because I'd spent the past year and a half taking care of him. He was an artist, and when you see that creative spark diminish, you realize that you have a responsibility to address that and keep it going in yourself."

Rogell found her musical and spiritual anchor quite by accident during a yoga class. At the ending of her first class, she felt an overwhelming "tingling, physical sensation" that she immediately identified as what she felt when she heard music that was incredibly beautiful. A moment later, her teacher announced, "Now you'll feel the life force." The moment was an epiphany for her.



“That is what music is—the life force,” she says. She decided that she wanted to take that feeling and help other people find it through chamber music.

And so the idea of the Heart of Chamber Music Institute was seeded. Rogell began to tackle her mission: To reconnect people with music and, by doing so, connect them with one another. “When we play music together it binds us and connects us,” she says. In its early days, the program drew about 40 students and took place during summer sessions at the New England Conservatory. Thinking about how she came to find her inspiration, Rogell began including other complementary techniques in her workshops—yoga, Tai Chi, and acting. She found that combining these other disciplines succeeded in helping “soften the everydayness of people’s lives and transform [it] into a positive chamber-music setting,” as she describes.

Rogell’s unique idea worked and she soon found that she’d set something in motion. It caught on fast, “like ripples,” she says. “People, no matter their musical level, began to connect to one another and to the music they were playing or listening to. It was a total success.”

‘Music is our original language.’

In 2001, HCM incorporated. Rogell’s program has since touched hundreds of students at all levels. “This is more than music coaching, it is a Rosetta stone,” says Rogell of the HCM program. Her edict for learning is simple but holistic. “We have to trust each other and respect each other while we play music.”

Rogell offers up the acronym TREE (trust, respect, empathy, and engagement) as the key to the HCM’s mission for students.

With these pieces in place, in addition to a solid musical education, Rogell finds that people at any level can make music and have a direction. But she points out a crucial caveat: “Preparation, practice, and playing the best you can are all essential.”

She emphasizes that without these in place, her mission is impossible. “This all comes from the school of thought of captur-

ing exactly what the composer is conveying,” she adds.

“I’ve realized that this way of coaching opens people up and helps them play better than they think they can,” says Rogell of her unique teaching style. She strives to find music that moves her students without making them feel self-conscious.

“People at all levels can become the music,” she says. “I have a group of adult beginners who are playing a Mozart trio, and there are times when they go beyond themselves and ‘speak’ to one another.”

For this reason, Rogell doesn’t audition people for placement in her chamber-music groups. “Instead, I have placement interviews and then try to figure out how to fit people together. I look for people to complement one another,” she says.

Rogell hopes to join people together in perfectly matched groups. And when the matchmaking works, “people leave here very full of energy and bouncy,” she says of her workshops. One of her students reports that the music makes her feel better than massage and is not as expensive.

Today, Rogell has 14 groups during the school year, some through the conservatory and others through her own studio. She sees about 55 students per session, and skill sets are broad—ranging from near-beginners to virtual professionals.

What sets the HCM apart from other workshops or teaching techniques is its central message: music is language and not an abstraction.

“Music is our original language,” Rogell says. “When, as listeners, you forget about the venue and what’s onstage, and just let yourself feel the music, you’ve succeeded in identifying with the people who are playing and you are becoming the music along with them. You’ve lost track of time and yourself and you’re in the moment.”

In fact, Rogell has three students who recently left their day jobs to become successful, professional musicians. “I feel very good about that,” she says. “But I feel very good about the groups that aren’t professional, too; they get to really play the music, too. They transcend themselves and really play the music.”

Rogell offers an example: “I never tell people to count. Instead I ask them to listen to understand where that line of music is coming from and where they join on. There are no entrances, there are only continuations. If

you can sing it inside of you, you can be open to music and truly feel it and never miss the connections. This strengthens the ensemble and makes it unbreakable.”

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Playing live music is important to Rogell; equally important is drawing in the audience and encouraging its active participation in the music being played. During student recitals, Rogell likes to bring the audience up close to the stage and has it sit in a semicircle instead of formal rows.

She often talks with the audience about how musical performance is really language and communication.

“When you go to a foreign country and don’t know the language, although you may not understand what is being said, it all sounds like very beautiful music.” Rogell emphasizes this idea in her workshops, too. At pre-performance talks, she asks the audience if anyone has ever felt an emotion in themselves or in others.

“Of course, everyone raises their hands,” Rogell says, “and I explain that this is all you need to ‘understand’ music.”

Rogell’s desire is to touch as many people as possible through music, to help them open up and experience music, and get past thinking they need to “understand” what they are hearing. “People are moved by live music,” she says. “Music is transformative. When you are playing, it transforms you. When you are listening to it, it transforms you.

“Music is a way to connect to yourself and others.” □

The Heart of Chamber Music recently released a DVD for players, music coaches, and music lovers. Created by Gillian Rogell and featuring Paul Katz and the Jupiter String Quartet, the DVD has already won two Telly Awards and, at press time, was slated to be picked up by East Coast PBS stations in the fall of 2008. *The Heart of Chamber Music Institute: A Practical Guide* is available at [musicalchemy.com](http://musicalchemy.com) for \$20.