

MUSIC FOR THE LOVE OF IT

JUNE 2002



A fringe benefit of learning both left and right-hand fingerings Ryan Thomson with friend at the Festival of American Fiddle Tunes, 2001

COPING WITH FOCAL DYSTONIA

by Ryan Thomson

I suggest equal time for lefties. I've heard every theory that purports to explain why violinists shouldn't play left-handed, including the idea that the orchestra looks better when everyone is bowing in the same direction. I'm not sure. The unusual nature of an entirely left-handed orchestra might enable it to collect higher performance fees. For even greater visual enjoyment, imagine an orchestra where the first violinists bow left-handed, and the second bow right-handed! The only theory that really makes any sense rests on the scarcity of left-handed violins. Unfortunately for me, I'm a right-handed person with no choice in my playing style, since a medical disability forced me to switch from right to left in order to keep playing at all.

In earlier days, before my physical troubles began, I won the Northeast Regional Award at the National Fiddle Contest in Weiser, Idaho, and I was honored to receive my trophy on stage along with Mark O'Connor, who had won the Northwestern Award in the same competition. I later became a full-time musician, toured with a hot Nashville country-rock band, and delighted in a life of performing, teaching, and publishing books about fiddling and music through Captain Fiddle Publications.

All this changed after my disability took full effect, but I was determined to relearn the violin. After nearly four years of futile efforts to retrain my defective right

continued on page 6

LISTEN

by Dorothy Stanaitis

It was the rustling that woke Jean as he sat dozing in the comfortable old chair that faced his front window. It seemed that he spent more and more of his time sleeping these days, either indoors in his favorite chair or on the outdoor sofa on the wide wooden porch of this simple log home, far from any other.

Although awake, Jean didn't open his eyes. He could hear and interpret sound better without the distractions of the view of the forested area beyond the porch.

The men he used to work with had always been amazed at his ability to distinguish sound, and even now in his old age when his hearing had failed quite a bit, his sensitivity was still keen. However, the rustling noises baffled him. Incredibly, it sounded like many men stealthily gathering in the small clearing between his home and the forest. It made him think of all of the tales he had heard about Indians surrounding the log cabins of settlers in America's wild west. But he was far, far from America, and no marauding bands of savages went seeking scalps in this remote area. There had been no reports of bands of robbers either, but Jean felt sure that the sounds he was processing behind closed eyes were those made by many feet creeping near.

He tried to dismiss his thoughts as the fancies of an old man confused by waking from a dream, but the more he listened, the more he was convinced that his first assessment had been correct. But how could it be? Few people, beyond some old friends, knew where he was located. And there was nothing in his simple style of life that would lure bandits seeking treasure. What would a group of robbers expect to find here in the forest far from the city?

Then there were some more sounds, sounds that Jean was unable to identify either from confusion or fear. For now, there was no denying that Jean was afraid. His heart was racing. His palms were damp, and his breathing had become rapid and shallow.

"How silly", he thought, "To be frightened



continued on page 7

THE IN BOX

TAFELMUSIK BAROQUE SUMMER INSTITUTE
Tafelmusik, the eminent Canadian baroque orchestra, will conduct a Summer Institute for period instruments, modern strings and singers at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, June 20-29, 2002. Further information is at www.tafelmusik.org, or call 416/964-9562.

EUROPEAN WORKSHOP UPDATE

MusicEnterprise hopes to include the piano in future chamber music workshops at its new location at the music school in Jindrichuv Hradec, South Bohemia. The new location will be used for continuing string orchestra workshops. Contact Geoff Piper, pipergeo@pt.lu, www.intermusica.org.

The Manhattan String Quartet will hold workshops in Budapest, Hungary, January 19-26 and January 26-Feb. 2, 2003, devoted to Bartok's *String Quartet #1*. Further information is at www.manhattanstringquartet.com, 212-874-4037.

KUDOS

Dear Editor,

Again I must write you a letter of praise, this time for the article "Back on the Risers Again" by Robin Lynn Pratt (April 2002). I LOVED it! This piece is exceptionally well-written, with a style as honest and warm as a conversation with a friend. The article clearly portrays, simply by example, an almost universal feeling that many adult returning musicians experience: the deep connection between having experienced music-making as a youngster and then returning to the oh-so-familiar yet very different experience as an adult. The article briefly presents new perspectives, settings, and values that a returning adult may find, and expresses the joy and poignancy of the continuity of life within the activity of singing or playing an instrument. Congratulations to Ms. Pratt!

Helen Spielman, flutist and teacher
Chapel Hill, N.C.

HAIKU

by Ted Rust

I'd better practice
Now or I'll be hurting by
The second day of workshop.

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WHY DIVERSIFY?

by Ted Rust

Specialists no doubt can become more skilled at a particular instrument, but does that make them better musicians? And for the amateur, does specializing better fulfill one's love of music?

Western classical musicians now live in a culture of specialization. Gone are the days when a musician was expected to do it all. We now look with awe on anyone with successful careers on more than one instrument, like Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, a former professional string player who is now a major opera singer, and to cluck sympathetically at the hard working doublers in theater orchestras, privately assuming they would get another job if they could play one instrument well enough.

My unexamined prejudices in this area were shaken when I attended a wonderful performance of the American Conservatory Theater's stage comedy *Fool Moon*, with Bill Irwin, David Shiner and The Red Clay Ramblers, a string band from North Carolina who play now and then on *A Prairie Home Companion*. (A former Rambler is Ryan Thomson, who appears on page 1 of this issue.) The Ramblers are several terrific bands in one: every member sings and plays a number of wind, string and percussion instruments very well, and dances, though their dancing was at best a comic foil to Irwin and Shiner's brilliant miming. Their instrumental playing in a dozen different American styles a major creative element of the show.

Certainly the adult beginner needs to concentrate very hard. But I take heart from the example of my friend Ruth Cazden who after taking up the violin from scratch — so to speak — in her middle years, went on almost immediately to add the viola so as not to miss any playing opportunities. After all, it only meant an extra hour a day of practice on top of her full-time job and two hours of violin practice. One gets out of music, like most things, no more than one puts into it, and having played with her I sense that she receives her full measure.

I am now trying hard to upgrade my flute playing in time to cover the second flute part of Honegger's *Rapsodie* in a workshop this summer. The main reason isn't the flute, though I love the instrument. It's the opportunity to work for a week on this beautiful music with three dear friends. I could cover the part on oboe, of course, but my color would be too strident and the balance would be wrong for this transparent tissue of delicate Impressionist sonorities. My oboe playing may not advance much during this period, but I hope to learn how the musical world of Honegger feels from the inside. That seems to me to be the whole point, and the joy, of being an amateur.

EFFECTIVE BREATHING

by Graeme Lister

I was taught to sing by the Munich-based Swiss tenor Ernst Häfliger, considered one of Europe's leading teachers. I learned a lot from him during the years I lived and worked near Munich. Eventually my career took me to the UK and after my last lesson he invited me to sit with him for a drink. His eyes were smiling as he poured a glass of sparkling wine and said in his soft voice "Herr Lister, you can't imagine how badly you sang when you first came to me!"



Ernst Häfliger

I remember that first day vividly! I had ridden my pushbike from the outskirts of Munich to the Musik Hochschule (the building where Hitler and Chamberlain had stood on the balcony to announce "Peace in our Time" in 1938) in the hope of an audience with the great man. He was busy with students and kept putting me off. "Come back in an hour!" he would say and then "Come back after lunch!" I persisted and in the end was ushered into his room and invited to sing something. I chose Giordani's beautiful *cavatina* "Caro mio ben" and as the accompanist started playing I noticed Häfliger was busying himself with some papers in the corner. Disappointed that he didn't seem to be paying much attention, I thought to myself "Well, I have a beautiful room and a pianist, I'll just enjoy the chance to sing" and completely lost myself in the music.

When I had finished I realized Herr Häfliger was on his feet smiling — he invited me to start lessons the next day. I felt highly flattered of course. I was no naïve youth — in fact I was in my mid-thirties — but at that moment I fantasized that this was the start of a stellar career, guided by a teacher who believed in my potential. How wrong I was!

The truth of the matter had been rather different. As I stood preparing to sing, he was convinced that no musical sound of any value could be produced by someone with my poor approach and posture. As he started to sort out his papers for the next lesson, he was amazed to find the whole room reverberating with one of the biggest voices he had ever heard. He had been far from impressed by my musicality, enunciation or

interpretation, but he had never worked with such a big voice and thought it would be a challenge to tame it!

My first lessons were difficult to say the least, not helped by the fact that I couldn't read music. My vowels were painstakingly corrected — native English speakers are always at a disadvantage when singing, since the spoken language contains so many "closed" vowels, unlike Italian or German. I was able to make strides in improving my musicality, but somehow my body remained stiff and unresponsive, despite my teacher's best efforts to show me how to stand and more importantly, breathe.

My first steps towards correct breathing came from an unexpected (and at the time) unwelcome source. For many years I had suffered intermittent coughing attacks at night, which often persisted until the early hours of the morning. I had consulted doctors around the world. Allergies were suspected, sprays were prescribed, but nothing helped. Now I was singing regularly and an attack meant at least a day's lost practice. On holiday that summer, a doctor who was traveling with us heard me coughing one night and arranged for me to visit a lung specialist in Munich the following week.

My lungs were thoroughly X-rayed and examined; I was told I had chronic bronchial asthma! Apparently the shape of my chest made it difficult for my lungs to move freely, resulting in accumulation of mucus in the cavities. Happily, there was a simple cure — *breathing exercises!* I was sent to a physiotherapist to work on my breathing and within a couple of months not only had my coughing stopped, but my approach to breathing while singing had radically altered. For the first time I felt my voice starting to coordinate with my body! Noticing my improvement, my teacher recommended a further step: one of his advanced students had studied the physiology of singing in Israel and was prepared to help me.

Musical Passages
Chamber Music Vacations in Wonderful Places

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Cratoule, Provence, France	Sep. 16-23, 2002
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The young man's name was Yaron and once a week he would take me through a series of exercises — many of which I still do today — combining breathing with various flexibility-enhancing exercises. Only recently I attended a flexibility class at my local gym and was pleased and surprised to see that many of the exercises I learned twenty years ago were incorporated in the routines. The human voice is just a small part of the magnificent instrument that is the human body. The body must be tuned like any other musical instrument. My breathing routine is now incorporated into my regular aerobic and strength training — there are many parallels between singing and sport!

Posture is also important not only in achieving a musical delivery, but also in the comfort of the listener. A singer who looks relaxed will convey what he is trying to sing much more readily than one who is tense and stiff. This is particularly important in auditions! First impressions count for a great deal to a music director — be it for an amateur production or professional engagement.

The “tuning” of the body depends of course on the ability and physical capacity of the singer. I am deeply moved by the beauty and resonance which Thomas Quastoff achieves in his recitals. Here is a singer who, due to the ravages of thalidomide before birth, has virtually no legs or arms for support, but his chest and abdominal muscles, together with his vocal chords provide one of the most beautiful instruments in the world today.

I did not fulfill my dream of becoming a professional singer, but I did find many opportunities to sing in public — in churches, at weddings and funerals, as well as taking leading roles in a number of highly “professional” amateur operas. Bavaria is a particularly rich environment — many of the churches engage an orchestra for a choral Mass on the numerous festival days celebrated there. I spent two years as the principal bass at St. Joseph's Cathedral in Munich, singing all the beautiful Haydn, Mozart and Schubert Masses. The love of making music has been an integral part of my life and the fresh perspectives it has brought have complemented and enhanced my career as a research scientist.

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SYMPHONIE IN FELS:

A WORKSHOP REPORT

by Lynda Cantor

“When the Amateurs Defy the Professionals”

was the headline of the *Luxemburger Wort's* review of our performance in Luxembourg Symphony Hall on Sunday afternoon, October 14, 2001. The concert, culminating the 8th annual orchestra seminar in Larochette, Luxembourg, consisted of Liszt's *Les Préludes* and Dvorak's *Seventh Symphony*. For us, the 80 participants, this concert was just the cherry on top of more than twenty-four hours of intensive rehearsals. We had begun the prior Thursday afternoon when we met for the first time in the Cultural Center in Larochette, Luxembourg, a little village about 20 minutes from the capital. The first downbeat came promptly at 3:00 p.m. that day for this group of amateur musicians from nine countries.

Let me explain how I came to be the one American participant. As a recent retiree, I love having the time to get — and keep — my oboe playing up to as high a standard as I can. So it was natural for me to want to add making music to my annual visit to Europe. I started looking for a workshop during the time of my visit by following various links on the web. Since I travel after tourist season, the possibilities were not extensive and not always what I was seeking: one orchestra already had three oboists for two parts, another appeared to be more about cultural tourism than music making, etc. Then my eye caught the name Larochette — a town I had never heard of until friends of mine moved there the prior year — and the word “symphony.” The dates fell during my stay and the program was very interesting to me. I faxed the person listed; his response provided the program. I immediately faxed back my application.

Did I know what I was getting into? Well, no, but at the very worst I would have some time with my friends and their boys. Then, in early July, I received my parts and a schedule: the first day, Thursday, there were to be two rehearsals, afternoon and evening; Friday and Saturday, three rehearsals each day, then on Sunday a dress rehearsal in the morning and the concert in the afternoon. I wanted immersion and it looked like I would get it. I gulped, then started ruminating and rationalizing: we're all masochists, we musicians, we thrive on challenges like this; if I can't handle it, so what, at least I will have tried; if my lip is in good shape I can probably make it; will have to keep up my practicing during the weeks before; I must be sure to have enough reeds; at least Brian and Zé won't feel obliged to entertain me. And so on. And I had as yet no idea of the playing level of my colleagues-to-be nor of the caliber of the conductor.

MUSIC FOR PEOPLE

David Darling, Artistic Director

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Turn your music-loving friends and relatives into music makers

Now some background information. In 1995 Luxembourg was to be "European Cultural Capital" for the year. Organizers of the event felt that amateur musicians merited a forum for participation and decided on an international symphony workshop led by a professional conductor and held to professional standards. The seminar association, *Symphonie in Fels* in German (and on the web at www.intermusica.org), *Symphonie à Larochette* in French, was established in 1994. A small-scale event was held in 1994 to test the waters; it was a success. So was the larger 1995 session; thus, what was originally conceived as a one-time event became annual.

The town of Larochette is ideally suited to be the home of this workshop; there is a hall large enough to seat a full symphony orchestra comfortably, a good hotel, a good restaurant, a youth hostel, a lovely scenic location . . . and absolutely nothing to do except make music. This isolation was deliberate, for one of the primary aims of the workshop is to think only of music and the symphonic works to be studied. The goal is to give the best amateur musicians the opportunity to get deeply involved, by means of rehearsal and practice, in a major symphonic work. Although the seminar ends with a concert, what is essential is the process which leads up to this event, like a pilgrimage in which the march toward the goal is more important than the goal itself, even though the goal retains its distinction.

We arrived Thursday afternoon and Maestro Volkmar Fritsch (who has been the conductor since the workshop's inception) was welcomed with applause. With the first measures I became aware of the proficiency and experience of the conductor. I soon realized as well the high technical level of my colleagues and their seriousness and devotion to the task at hand. This impression continued and grew through Friday's sectional rehearsals with experienced professional coaches; it built through Saturday's full rehearsals and Sunday's dress. Finally, the ride into town and the culminating event, the concert. Yes, there were some wrong notes, some wrong entrances, some faulty intonation, but we made music and loved sharing this with our audience.

There were two issues I had to deal with which turned out to be challenges rather than show-stoppers. First, the workshop is conducted (verbally) in German since most of the musicians are from Germany or other German-speaking countries. However, the conductor, the organizer and the coaches all speak English, so I did not miss any comments or criticism directed at me; for all else I got by with my rudimentary German vocabulary and the help of my colleagues. More of a challenge is that European orchestras tune higher than we do in North America. The first thing I was asked by the first bassoon was what I tuned to; when I replied "440," her response was that I'd have to chop off all my reeds! Of

course, I did not, but I set my tuner up to 443 and handled the situation.

I was asked just before the concert if I would consider returning for the next session; at that moment my answer was, "I am too exhausted to even think about that right now." Later that evening, as I dozed on the train back to Paris I thought, "Yes, I do want to do that again!" And I will not be the only one returning, for in chatting with my colleagues I discovered that most had participated for three or four years.

If you would like more information, my email address is Lynda401@cs.com (I can tell you nothing about accommodations or meals since I stayed with my friends) or you can contact the organizer: Hubert Müller-Schori, 5, auf Preimert L-6955 Rodenbourg, Luxembourg, fax: 00352 770 695. Upcoming dates are October 3-6, 2002 and October 2-5, 2003.

Lynda Cantor is a graduate of Manhattan School of Music. She played professionally for about five years, then stopped playing and had a successful career as a computer programmer. In retirement she has returned to the oboe. She plays in two orchestras, a wind quintet and mixed chamber group, and is thinking about taking up the cello.



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shoulder to bow, it occurred to me to try left-handed playing. Now, observers often ask me why I play left-handed. (Know-it-all types don't start with a question: they merely inform me in an annoying way that I'm playing violin "wrong.") To those who ask politely, I explain that a disability prevents my playing right handed.

Subsequent questions are often about the nature of my disability: tendinitis, carpal tunnel, or traumatic injury? If someone indicates a sincere interest, I will tell the whole story about an inherited neurological disease called focal dystonia. Otherwise, I may nod vaguely at the mention of a typical overuse injury. This often causes proponents of non-Western medicine to lecture me until I explain patiently that before I was properly diagnosed, I spent several years trying acupuncture, pressure-point therapy, Rolfing, chiropractic work, and Eastern healing techniques, as well as standard Western-style physical therapy, orthopedic analysis, and expensive testing (and I didn't have health insurance at the time). Botulism toxin treatment was ruled out for the particular muscles affected because it would interfere with other motions needed to bow a violin.

People then ask how long it took to become "good" again, once I'd decided to become a leftie. It's been a gradual process, and I've found it interesting to see which playing techniques have transferred from right to left. I was one of those who, when drawing the bow right-handed across the strings for the first time, made a pleasing sound. No such luck when playing left-handed! My first few days produced torrents of scratches and squawks worse than anything that came from my beginning fiddle students. It didn't seem to matter that I diligently applied techniques based upon years of experience as a player and teacher.

In fact, after 20 years of playing right-handed, my entire body resisted retraining. My brain ordered my left hand to control vibrato, but unfortunately my left hand was now holding the bow. My right arm wanted to bend at the elbow and making bowing motions, but it was now supposed to be supporting the neck of the violin.

An unexpected difficulty was my need to relearn sight-reading on violin. Since the strings on my left-handed violin were reversed, I would read notes to be played on the A string and play them on the D string, and vice versa. I would similarly head to the G string to play notes written for the E string. I understood the problem intellectually, but it took time to get my body to cooperate.

Beside the physical work of having to relearn from scratch, I also experienced depression from feeling so distant from my former playing abilities. It was emotionally devastating to have lost the ability to

express myself through my violin. I craved the pleasure of making good music and tried to compensate by improving my piano skills and learning to play the accordion.

My ability to improvise was the hardest thing to recapture. I had to control my bowing and fingering closely. If I relaxed and began playing instinctively, my limbs became confused and my playing ground to a halt.

Even now, my left arm isn't particularly coordinated. I've compensated with extra bow practice. Achieving control over right-hand fingering and intonation has also been harder than I expected. (My experience contrasts with the traditional view that fingering should be easier with the dominant hand, an argument often used to convince lefties to play right-handed). My right hand is slightly larger than my left, though, which makes stretching for intervals easier.

My disability is confined to the back muscles that ordinarily stabilize the shoulder to enable precise bowing. Because my right hand and forearm work normally, I can easily play mandolin, banjo, flute, guitar, accordion and piano in standard fashion. I have two dilemmas to deal with, however. First, any tune or technique that I formerly played on right-handed violin must be completely relearned for left-handed violin playing. Second, I formerly found it easy to transfer a fiddle tune to mandolin, since both instruments have the same configuration.

Pieces that I learn on the left-handed violin now need to be relearned to play on a right-handed mandolin because of the reversed string order. Sometimes I'll forget whether I've learned the right-handed mandolin version of a tune first learned on left-handed fiddle, and I don't find out until I actually try to play it. (I've had poor results playing a left-handed mandolin because of the difficulty of controlling a pick with my left hand.) With lots of practice, however, I am becoming more efficient at making right-to-left and left-to-right conversions.

Left-handed playing has also greatly improved my teaching skills. Having had to learn to play violin twice has clarified my memories of what it was like to be a beginner. A surprising discovery is that students can easily learn techniques by watching me, since my left-handed playing matches what they see when they play in front of a mirror. Hard work has prevailed, and I'm finally playing folk fiddle at an advanced level again.

My passion is playing dances, including Irish ceilis, contra and square dances, Cajun, and swing dances. I've also taken up a couple of weekly chamber music sessions. (My chamber music coach loves the fact that I play left handed, because it's much easier to orient all members of our quartet toward the audience when we're performing.)

I'm excited to be playing the violin again, and I strongly encourage other disabled players to seek alternative ways of making music. I've learned a lot in the process, and I'd be happy to share my thoughts and experiences. Please visit me at my web site, at <www.captainfiddle.com>, and send me your email.

DISCOVERING MY ROOTS AS AN "OLD TIME" MUSICIAN

excerpted from Ryan Thomson's "Captain Fiddle" Web Site, <www.tiac.net/users/cfiddle/oldtime.html>



The Last Chance String Band, 1974
Ryan Thomson, lower right

When I was a child, my grandmother on my mother's side told me stories that her grandmother had told her about crossing the great plains westward to Utah in a wagon train. I remember sitting in her kitchen where I was taught to build model covered wagons with paper and glue. When she learned of my interest in fiddling she told me about the family fiddle and dulcimer (appalachian) that had also traveled on the long and perilous cross country journey. These instruments were used to play for old time square dances and quadrilles on the long journey.

At some point before I was born she gave the instruments to a museum where they now are displayed as examples of pioneer life. I'm happy that they are safe, but I wish that I had them to play myself, and pass on to other members of my family. When I had only been playing the fiddle a short while, I visited her and played. After listening to a tune she asked me to play again, and to my amazement, she began dancing. I didn't previously know that she danced.

She was probably either "clogging" or "step dancing," to use the modern terms, but to her it was probably just what you did when you heard the sound of the fiddle. She told me that she had learned how to dance to fiddle tunes as a child. I have a clear picture in my mind of her dancing, and later, when I had a chance to learn clogging steps myself, I would remember my grandmother's flying feet.

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LISTEN

continued from page 1

by noises in the mid-morning. This isolated way of life is turning me into a fanciful eccentric, fearing attacks from a band of Indians."

Jean decided to confront his fears. He drew a deep breath, then slowly opened his eyes and stared ahead at the view from his window. What met his eyes made him gasp in shock! It was Eugene — Eugene and all of his men — and they were creeping stealthily up to his house, surrounding the wooden steps that led to the front porch. Eugene was motioning them into strategic groups, and also signaling for silence.

Jean felt his pulse begin to pound as he recognized some of the men gathered there. He tried to get to his feet, but felt the weakness in his legs was more than the usual hesitance of old age. He put his hands on the arms of the worn chair, and leaned forward. His hands, once so forceful and commanding, had little of the strength and vigor of his youth, but still he managed to push himself up to his feet. He steadied himself for just a moment, walked to the door, and flung it open.

Startled, Eugene met Jean's eyes, gave a low bow, and then turned to his men. They were ready. Eugene raised his arms, and then brought them down in the signal that Jean so clearly recognized. He closed his eyes, and floods of emotion washed over him as the music caressed his ears.

How kind of Maestro Ormondy to bring the entire Philadelphia Orchestra from their concert in Helsingfors to a wooded area far from Finland's capital to salute him by playing his own music, *Finlandia*.



Jean Sibelius and Eugene Ormandy at Ainola in 1951.
photo on page 1: Ainola, home of Jean and Aina Sibelius

(photos © Sibeliusmuseum)

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CONTENTS

page

COPING WITH FOCAL DYSTONIA

by Ryan Thomson

1

LISTEN

by Dorothy Stanaitis

1

WHY SPECIALIZE?

by Ted Rust

2

EFFECTIVE BREATHING

by Graeme Lister

3

SYMPHONIE IN FELS: a Workshop Report

by Lynda Cantor

4
