



NOTHING BUT  
MAGIC

4



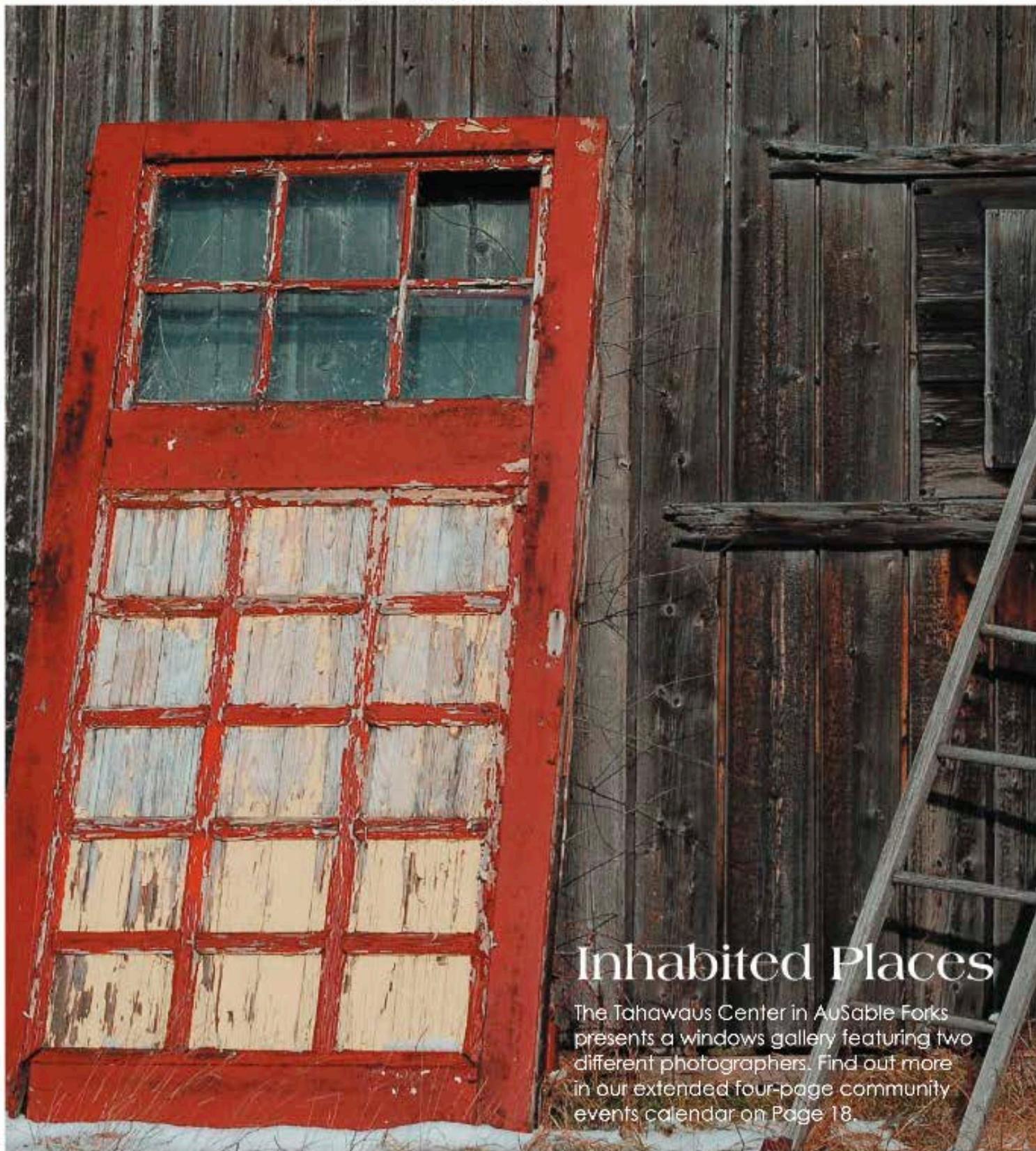
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11



TAKING THINGS  
SLOW

12



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Photos courtesy of Steven Kilmowski

# Nothing But Magic

By Benjamin Pomerance

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DON'T ASK Steven Klimowski why he started playing the clarinet. All these years later, the man still does not know. He remembers the scene like it was yesterday: the fifth-grade classroom in Los Gatos, Calif., the music teacher strolling in unannounced and demonstrating various band instruments to the students, the electric sensation that crackled when the instructor played a few notes on the clarinet and then those beautiful words, "Have your parents sign these papers, and we can start giving you lessons next week."

But those reminiscences do not define why he gravitated so quickly toward the instrument that he will play in a recital with pianist Sadie Brightman in Elizabethtown on April 27 and 28. "There's no logical explanation about exactly why the clarinet fascinated me," he states. "But this was the day that changed my life. There's a real magic in music."

It certainly felt like magic the next day when Klimowski came home from school and found a present awaiting him. His father — the man from the old Polish neighborhood in Chicago, the worker who left his family's home at the age of 15 so he could get a job laboring in the Nevada desert and the person with no spare time to listen to classical music — had stopped by a music store after work and purchased something for his son. There it sat, looking to his son like a precious jewel.

"I was almost afraid to unlock the case," he remembers. "But finally, I did, and inside was this wooden clarinet that my father had bought for me."

The new toy never lost its luster, either. Klimowski and his instrument were inseparable, even when it made noises that reminded listeners of a turkey with laryngitis. "Getting

the reed vibrating felt magical," he recalls. "Just making the sound — even when it was a bad sound — felt magical."

Before long, though, the bad sounds diminished in number. Success fuels a child's ego, and Klimowski rapidly racked up his share of achievements on the clarinet. Of course, some harsh truths also played their part. He loved baseball and yearned to play for his beloved San Francisco Giants. Yet even at this tender age, he knew that he was too small for this reverie to come true — far better to pursue the brass ring that felt within reach.

Until this goal, too, became unsustainable. "Clarinetists don't make any money, Steve," his father told him. So, when the time came to meet with his high school guidance counselor and select classes for his freshman year, his dad's firm words guided him to make practical choices, picking options that seemed geared toward a college degree in sensible professions. By the time he was done being practical, no room in his schedule remained for music.

The practicality lasted for two weeks. Then, while sitting in a classroom, listening to another interminable lecture, a new sound distracted him. It was the high school marching band, practicing their music and maneuvers on the football field. For the remainder of the period, he didn't hear one word that the teacher uttered. Instead, he heard a different voice, one that was hollering at him to get up and leave.

"I didn't even go to my next class," Klimowski says. "I marched down to the guidance counselor's office and declared that I needed to be in the band." He pauses. "And my guidance counselor looked at me and said, 'Good. What took you so long?'"



He was playing in the clarinet section the following day. The band director quickly recognized the presence of a youngster who was as devoted as he was talented. After one rehearsal, he handed the kid a recording of Gustav Mahler's final symphony. The boy went home and listened to it. "Something happened to me," he recalls. "I had never heard music like this before. And I just started devouring everything that Mahler had written after that."

Except for Mahler's *Symphony No. 2, the Resurrection Symphony*. "It absolutely stumped me," Klimowski says. "I listened to it a dozen times or more, just closing my eyes and listening. It still didn't get through to me." The climax of the composition particularly perplexed him: the abrupt tolling of the bells and the out-of-nowhere entrance of the choir singing "He shall rise again."

Then came an encounter with death. Klimowski was working as a tour guide at a local attraction at the time. When his boss' wife passed away, Klimowski felt obligated to attend the funeral. "It was a traditional Catholic service with an open casket," he recalls. "This was the first dead body I had seen in my life." At the end of the service, he followed the pallbearers up the aisle. As the procession reached the exit, the church's bells suddenly began to ring.

"I was absolutely floored," he remembers. "This was Mahler, playing out all around me. As soon as I got home, I put on my recording of the Second Symphony. This time, I understood every single

moment of it. And when the bells came on at the end, I could not stop crying." He exhales deeply. "This was the first time that I understood what deep connections music can have with real life."

But this, too, was real life: "Clarinetists don't make any money, Steve," preached the father. This time, though, the son didn't listen. Instead, he decided that he wasn't going to college. Not right away, anyway. His band director advised him to write to Stanley Drucker, the Brooklyn-born clarinet titan. To Klimowski's shock, the legend wrote back. "He said he had no private students outside his studio at Juilliard," Klimowski recalls. "But he also wrote, 'You should study with my teacher, Leon Russianoff. He's a better teacher than I am.'"

Klimowski followed Drucker's advice — not just once, but multiple times. No letter ever came back. Months passed. The aspiring clarinetist grew nervous. Finally, he looked up Russianoff's telephone number, and with his hands shaking, he dialed it.

"Leon answered the phone," Klimowski remembers. "I introduced myself. And he said, 'Oh, you're that hotshot from California. Sure, I'll teach you. Come on out here, kid.'" He laughs. "Off I went to New York City. And Leon was a wonderful teacher. He gave you all of the technical training that you needed to develop your musical ideas, but he never asked you to sound like anyone else. He let you search for your own identity."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

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The searching continued for the next seven years. During that period, Klimowski earned a degree from the Manhattan School of Music and began pursuing another diploma at SUNY Purchase, studying with Russianoff throughout this entire time. He also found a range of creative ways to put bread on the table: shopping mall janitor, fast-food restaurant cook, Carnegie Hall usher and teacher at a home for dependent children from inner city neighborhoods.

Then, to his astonishment, he won an audition for an orchestral job. There was only one problem: the job was in Mexico. Klimowski didn't speak Spanish. He didn't have a passport. He hadn't finished his degree at SUNY Purchase. And the orchestra wanted him to arrive in two weeks.

He went to Russianoff for advice. The teacher's response was swift. "He said, 'Son — if you don't take that job, I don't ever want to see your a\*\* again,'" Klimowski remembers. Hurriedly, he packed his bags, got himself a passport and boarded a Mexico-bound plane.

In hindsight, he says that Russianoff's advice was perfect. The music that the orchestra played was beautiful. Even more beautiful was Bonnie, the American cellist who joined the ensemble that September. Every year, the orchestra played 155 concerts in a 40-week period. They spent "lots of time on the bus together," Klimowski chuckles wickedly. "We got to know each other really well." Predictably, this story ends with a wedding.

But it also ends with a move to a place where Klimowski never imagined living: Bonnie's home state of Vermont. Spurred by the tyrannical actions of their conductor, Enrique Batiz — "a real rock star," Klimowski declares, "and a real SOB" — the married musicians sought to return stateside. At the time, Klimowski's native state of California offered no job opportunities. "I love green grass," he says. "I don't like cities. So, we went to Vermont."

They've been in the Green Mountain State ever since. Klimowski found teaching jobs at the University of Vermont, Middlebury College and Saint Michael's College. Opportunities for gigs came in unexpected numbers, too. Currently, he's the principal clarinet of the Burlington Chamber Orchestra and plays with Raising Cane, the Vermont Symphony Orchestra's woodwind trio.

His pride and joy, however, is debatably the zaniest venture of a life filled with coloring-outside-the-lines capers. It starts with a premise that some might deem sacrilegious. "You can only hear a Beethoven symphony so many times before you've heard it," he states. "Not that there is anything wrong with Beethoven. But there's something really special about hearing something new, even if that something new isn't the second coming of Beethoven."

So in 1987, Klimowski announced the creation of a professional group devoted to playing something new: the Vermont Contemporary Music Ensemble (VCME). Today, the group still exists, held together primarily by Klimowski's infinite volunteer hours in the pilot house of this icebreaking ship. "I'm a stubborn Pole," he laughs. Then his voice grows serious. "When I started this group, I suddenly had a mailbox stuffed with new pieces of music that I hadn't even solicited. That's why we have to go on. The world has so much good music that needs to be heard."

This reminds him of something. The hour is growing late, he notes, and there is still much work to be done. "I haven't had time to practice yet today," he states. "That's what I am going to do now after I hang up the phone for the rest of the night." It is already after 9 p.m.

But then he tells one more story, one more illustration of why the VCME and the teaching and the performing and the creation of music itself has to go on. The protagonist of the tale is his father, the man who never seemed to get past his constant warning to his son, "Clarinetists don't make any money, Steve." The indefatigable worker from Chicago passed away in 2017. As the strong man's

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memory melted away, the clarinetist wondered if his father had ever come to terms with his career choice.

So, he packed up his instrument and went into the memory care unit in Iowa where his dad was living out his final days. And then he took the clarinet out of its case and played for his father, hoping that the sounds would vault over the sentries who were robbing his father of his remembrances of things past. The last time that the son saw the father alive, he played a little improvisation on the theme of Somewhere Over The Rainbow. He played Amazing Grace.

"And after I finished one piece, my father said, 'Amazing!'" Klimowski recalls. "And then he said it again after another piece. And he kept on saying that word — 'Amazing!' — over and over and over again for about two more minutes." He stops. "I think," he finally continues, "that I got his blessing at last." He stops again. "This is what music does. When you share music with someone, there is always a chance that something will move someone's heart in an unforgettable way. When that happens, there is nothing more magical in the world."

*Piano By Nature will present Steven Klimowski and Sadie Brightman playing works by Brahms, Debussy, Chopin, Bernstein, Allen Shawn and Alexandria Fol on April 27 at 7 p.m. and April 28 at 3 p.m. in the historic Hand House at 8273 River St. in Elizabethtown, N.Y. For tickets and more information, call 518-962-8899 or visit pianobynature.org.*

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