

**New Chamber Music Series**  
**a "labor of love"**  
**For Symphony Executive Director**

By: Eric Valliere

(Nashua, NH) I can remember very clearly the moment when I began to love chamber music. I was twenty-six with a master's degree in composition under my belt, working as an intern for the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. Because I couldn't afford tickets to many concerts, and since I was an ardent advocate of new music, I attended as many SFCMP rehearsals as I could get to. On this particular autumn day – if San Francisco can be said to have an autumn at all – I found myself in a basement practice room at SF State University with some of the city's most accomplished string players, along with composer Steven Mackey, of whom I knew nothing, save for the fact that he hailed originally from California but now taught at Princeton (in retrospect, there's much to be gleaned from those two facts alone).

But Mackey wasn't there simply to coach rehearsals of his *Troubadour Songs*; he was there as a participant, playing his electric guitar along with the quartet of strings. I won't dwell too long here on the piece itself, except to say that it is raucous, muscular, sinewy, but also lush, melodic, and charmingly witty. I admired it right away, and by the end of the rehearsal process – my main topic, here – that initial admiration had developed into a real and lasting fondness.

What I experienced in the following two weeks or so taught me as much about chamber music as years of study. As a composer at New England Conservatory in

Boston, I wrote primarily for chamber ensembles, either coaxing (begging!) my friends to serve as guinea pigs for my new works or, in the best instances, composing in response to requests from soloists or ensembles that I write for them. Rehearsals for these pieces were absurdly polite affairs: me, trying my hardest to keep the players in the room and interested, and the players deferring to “the composer’s wishes”, in the vaguely worshipful way they’d been taught to think about us creative types. In the end, the experience could often be stultifying.

The quartet rehearsing *Troubadour Songs* with Mackey, however, with decades of experience playing the newest (and often, the most challenging) music, were not shy about pushing back at the composer. The piece is very difficult; one has to live with it for a time before absorbing its complex internal rhythmic structure, and these players became increasingly frustrated. Arguments about tempo and balance were nearly constant, and the phrase “no, let’s just do it again” was a refrain so often repeated that it began to take on its own *quasi*-musical life. It is precisely this process, this communal push and pull to arrive at a musical consensus that lies at the heart of great chamber music performances. For they did, of course, arrive at consensus, and the spectacular performance was that much deeper as a result of the work they’d done together.

Years later, as Director of Noe Valley Chamber Music in San Francisco, I had the chance to work with most of the city’s – and, indeed, some of the country’s – most accomplished soloists and chamber musicians. While these players did not rehearse on-site, most of them had performed together for years, and brought a rapport to the stage that was often mesmerizing.

When I moved back east to begin work with the Nashua Symphony Association, I was (and still am) excited to be working with larger ensembles, but in my heart I also missed that chamber music experience which cannot be replicated with the massed forces of chorus and orchestra (for a reasonable analogy, compare the grand display of human forces of the Olympics’ opening ceremonies in China to the elegant pantomimes of the dance troupe *Pilobolus*, and you’ll see what I mean). Music making in large ensembles leans, by necessity, much more toward the

autocratic, whereas chamber music's process is more democratic, more of a conversation.

In the particular case of the first concert of our new chamber music series, the conversation moves beyond the players. In a sense, it's a conversation between the composers Dvořák and Chadwick. Here we have two contemporaries, each trying to define an American school of composition, reacting to each other's ideas. And, I'm looking forward to engaging the audience and players in a dialog about the "American-ness" of each of these works.

Thus the rapport extends beyond the players to the composers and audience. It's precisely this intimacy, this giving and giving back, that makes chamber music so special, and it's why I consider these concerts a labor of love.

*Before joining the Nashua Symphony Association as Executive Director in 2005, Eric Valliere served for several years as Executive Director of Volti (a professional chamber choir in San Francisco), as Director of Noe Valley Chamber Music, and Managing Director of the San Francisco Conservatory's BluePrint Project. He has been a frequent contributor (as classical music critic) to andante.com and the SF Classical Voice, and he's written for classicstoday.com and San Francisco Magazine. Eric holds a degree in Drama from Tufts University, as well as bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees from the New England Conservatory, where he studied composition. He currently serves as Vice-Chair of the New England Orchestra Consortium, and is on the board of the Bubs Foundation, which introduces high school students to a cappella singing.*

**WHEN:** Sunday, September 28 at 3:00 p.m.

**WHAT:** **NSO Concertmaster Quartet**

**CHADWICK**  
String Quartet No. 4

**DVORAK**  
String Quartet No. 12 in F Major "American"

**WHERE:** Rivier College's Dion Center  
Nashua, NH

**OF SPECIAL NOTE: THIS CONCERT IS FREE WITH A VALID RIVIER COLLEGE I.D.**

**Ticket Information**

Tickets are \$15 general admission; \$12 seniors and students (5-18 or with ID), available at the door, at the Nashua Symphony Box Office (6 Church St.), and can be charged to major credit cards by calling 603.595.9156 or by visiting the NSA website, [www.nashuasymphony.org](http://www.nashuasymphony.org).