

https://www.midcoastvillager.com/life/music/six-seasons-of-radical-hospitality/article_e7e8eca5-754e-4220-ac9b-df6c09e7d0bd.html

MUSIC

Six Seasons of 'Radical Hospitality'

A Searsmont concert series returns with its biggest lineup yet.

By John Blodgett

Jun 29, 2026



The 2026 Muzzy Ridge Concerts lineup: The American String Quartet, top; bottom from left: Graeme Steele Johnson, Min Kwon, Claire Bryant and Nadia Sirota.

Photos courtesy of Jensen Artists

For 35 years, Bob Sirota — who spent three decades leading conservatories, trained at Juilliard, Oberlin and Harvard, and saw Carnegie Hall premiere a new work this spring — composed mostly alone in a small studio in his Searsmont home. Five years ago, for a handful of summertime concerts, he and his wife, Vicki, began filling it with fellow musicians and a small audience. “Radical hospitality” is what Bob calls it. “We have two requirements for people who play here,” he said. “One is they have to be really great performers. And the other is we have to want to spend a couple of days with them at our house.”

The result is Muzzy Ridge Concerts, a nonprofit chamber music series returning this July for its sixth season. It will feature three programs of two performances each. After each performance, guests and artists alike can linger on the lawn just outside the studio, cookies and lemonade in hand, the grand piano visible inside and a field of wildflowers in bloom behind them. For Vicki, an Episcopal priest, the setting shares an aspect of attending church. “The relationship between music concerts and, for me, service of worship is similar, in that you’re gathering people together,” she said. “You’re having a common experience at the same time.”



Seating – both inside and outside – at Bob Sirota's Searsmont studio provides an intimate setting for the Muzzy Ridge Concert Series.

File photo

The season opens July 6 and 7 with pianist Min Kwon and clarinetist Graeme Steele Johnson, performing works spanning the 19th through 21st centuries. Together, they'll play Brahms' Sonata in E-flat for Clarinet and Piano and Debussy's "Première Rhapsodie." Johnson will also play "Apparition," a solo clarinet piece by Viet Cuong. "I swear you'd think three clarinets are playing," Bob said. "I don't know how he does it... It's the craziest thing you've ever heard. And it's beautiful."

Bob met Kwon through the project she will also perform solo that weekend. During the pandemic, Kwon began commissioning 76 composers from varied backgrounds to each write a variation on "America the Beautiful" for the nation's 250th anniversary. The collection, "America/Beautiful," was released in May. Bob was one of several established composers who

donated their fee, which let Kwon pay early-career composers. "They did it for free," Kwon said, "so it became that gift that continues to give." Kwon, who runs her own concert series out of a barn in New Jersey, said playing a space like Muzzy Ridge offers the same benefit as her own: She can see the audience, make eye contact and feel their energy, rather than playing to a dark concert hall beyond the stage lights.

A performance of all 76 compositions would stretch to five hours, so at Muzzy Ridge, Kwon will perform only a handful: Reena Esmail's "America/Dash," Donnacha Dennehy's "New Jersey," John Harbison's "Getting the Upper Hand in America," and both variations Bob wrote at her request, "Alabaster Cities" and "God Mend Thine Every Flaw."

The American String Quartet — violinists Peter Winograd and Laurie Carney, violist Matthias Buchholz and cellist Wolfram Koessel — takes the stage July 14 and 15, performing Haydn's Quartet in D Major and Brahms' Quartet in A Minor. This will be one of the last chances to hear the ensemble, now in its 53rd year, before it retires. The quartet's final U.S. concerts are set for Taos, New Mexico, in September 2027, followed by a last European tour in Spain. Carney, the quartet's last original member, believes she is now the longest-tenured woman ever to play in a string quartet.

Carney has known Bob since he was president of the Manhattan School of Music, where the quartet has been in residence since 1984. He wrote a violin sonata for her, and she suggested her former student, pianist David Friend, to accompany her. The two performed it at Muzzy Ridge's inaugural season in 2021 and returned again last year, making this summer Carney's third visit. "Bob just looks after us unbelievably and cooks, wines and dines, takes us for lobster dinners," she said. "So it's really a whole three-day event."

Both of the Sirotas' children, violists Jonah and Nadia, have played at Muzzy Ridge in past seasons. Nadia, a Juilliard contemporary of Kwon's, returns July 28 and 29 with cellist Claire Bryant to perform works by Caroline Shaw and Nico Muhly along with Beethoven's "Duet for Two Obligato Eyeglasses." Landing her this year took some doing. Nadia produces, curates and performs in her own summer series at Lincoln Center. She also splits her time between Los

Angeles and New York, and this summer offered only a single open week that lined up with the Muzzy Ridge Concerts schedule. For the Sirotas, having their children perform is about more than filling a program. "This is also a way of keeping our family close," Bob explained.

Tickets for this season were two-thirds sold with nearly two weeks still to go before opening night, Bob noted, a pace the series hasn't seen before. The venue's indoor capacity tops out at 50. Tickets, including for the first time a season pass, are available at robertsirota.com/muzzy-ridge-concerts, where donations are also accepted.

John Blodgett

Photojournalist