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## Rafael Popper-Keizer steps into new role as Monadnock Music artistic director



Boston area musician Rafael Popper-Keizer talks about his new role as Monadnock Music's artistic director at F house in Keene on a recent Saturday. Staff photo by MEGHAN PIERCE » [Buy this Image](#)

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Published: 1/19/2020 8:56:03 PM

Monadnock Music's new artistic director [Rafael Popper-Keizer \(https://www.ledgertranscript.com/arMMArtistDirectorPIC-ml-121919\\_-31251436\)](https://www.ledgertranscript.com/arMMArtistDirectorPIC-ml-121919_-31251436) likens planning the upcoming 55th season to cooking a huge banquet over several weeks.

"What pairs with this? And what goes with that?" he said. "It's a daunting task, but it's very exciting."

The Monadnock Ledger-Transcript caught up with the Boston area musician at the Prime Roast coffeehouse in Keene on a recent Saturday where Popper-Keizer stopped during his drive from Boston to Vermont to meet up with his band mates from the Grammy nominated, self-conducted orchestra A Far Cry for their annual retreat to plan their upcoming season.

He is also in the midst of putting the finishing touches on [Monadnock Music's \(https://www.ledgertranscript.com/Monadnock-Music-30275994\)](https://www.ledgertranscript.com/Monadnock-Music-30275994) programming for this summer. He has been a performing musician with Monadnock Music for the past 18 years and for the past few years he has programmed between six to eight of the summer concerts.

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“Every year it has been the highlight of my summers,” Popper-Keizer said. “It’s such a great area to do something I find so personally rewarding. I feel incredibly fortunate to have made this sort of random connection 18 years ago that has turned into something so profound.”

Popper-Keizer is originally from Northern California. He moved to Boston 25 years ago to attend the New England Conservatory of Music. “I have been playing cello all my life. I started when I was five and it was my third instrument at that point.”

He was a young cellist a few years out of the Conservatory when he got his first gig playing in a Monadnock Music village concert. However, when he showed up six hours late, he thought it would be his last.

“I was recruited by the founder James Bolle, who was of course a conductor and composer, and he was notorious for being a very strong personality and very demanding, but he was always very, very kind to me. ... I remember, actually, my first concert with Monadnock Music I missed completely because I got stuck in traffic coming up from Boston. It was like six hours in the car from Boston, I think, up to Hancock. Fortunately my part was very small, a 15-minute piece. And I was like, ‘This is it. This is my first time with the festival and I am never working here again.’ But he (Bolle) was so sweet and things worked out quite differently.”

Popper-Keizer has since returned every summer to play, sometimes with Bolle, who passed away last year. It started with just a few concerts a summer, then it turned into spending several weeks to eventually most of the summer.

Over the years the Monadnock Region has become the summer home of Popper-Keizer along with his wife and two children, who are currently ages 18 and 12.

“This has been my family’s summer jam, always,” he said. “We’ve been coming here since they were born and we love it. ... It was really my first connection with Peterborough and the surrounding Monadnock area and I fell in love, it was so beautiful.”

His career has been one of “mostly constant performance” as a freelance musician, but having worked with so many different groups over the years he has grown into the role as an artistic director through his programming experience.

“I have about eight groups that I regularly play with and beyond that there are a dozen more that I play with when I have a little bit of free time. It’s all classical, but that covers everything from music from 400 years ago to music that’s fresh off the page,” he said. “A lot of groups that I play for we do commissions of recent composers and we do old classics like Beethoven and Brahms and everything that falls in the cracks in between.”

Popper-Keizer plans to bring that same sensibility to his programming of the Monadnock Music seasons.

“Finding programming that is relevant, encompassing incredible masterpieces that people love and know already, to promoting new music that is just being written,” he said.

He also wants to discover and reintroduce forgotten music and composers.

“Over the span of history, there are so many pieces that have been forgotten. And that is also an incredible joy to find music that was

maybe written 120 years ago that no one has ever heard of but is actually amazing,” he said.

Along with his deep sense of classical music history, he also wants to bring the new and offbeat.

“I think that is something that people really respond to, something different, something a little bit new and strange,” he said. “It’s a balancing act. You want each program to have a coherent artistic statement, but also to have the whole season to make sense as a whole.”

Popper-Keizer said he is most excited about planning the free village concerts, which are expanding this year. “The heart is really the village concerts, presenting these free concerts. That’s the heart of the programming.”

And for that reason chamber music, which only needs a handful of musicians, is the hallmark of Monadnock Music as well, because it takes up less space than a full orchestra, which calls for about 35 musicians.

“Chamber music is exciting because it may not have the kind of sonic grandeur of a full orchestra but it provides this incredible intimacy,” Popper-Keizer said. “And you’re up close and you can see each individual musician in a string quartet, let’s say, and you can see how they relate to the music and how they relate to each other. And often people come and they’ll be five, ten-feet away and it’s a powerful experience for us and it’s a powerful experience for our audience.”

And while chamber music comes with its traditional ensembles, such as the string quartet or piano trio, he plans to change it up, he said.

“One of our first village concerts will be a cello quartet or cellos playing together, which is really fun to program for,” he said. “And just different kinds of combinations of wind instruments. So we’re trying, within the really intimate chamber ensemble, to bring as much color and variety as we can.”

Music, Popper-Keizer said, comes down to the shared human experience. “The things that we all go through as humans,” he said.

And that idea is what is influencing him the most as he plans for the upcoming Monadnock Music season.

“Music is ultimately about communication. It’s about exploring our shared humanity. ... As a performing musician, it’s about the relationships you forge with other people, because sitting and playing music in your room is not that exciting,” he said. “It’s really about the magic that happens when you get more than one person on a stage or in a rehearsal room and you’re creating something, you’re recreating something. Just that mix of personalities is always what keeps it so exciting and so fresh and so beautiful.”

You can learn more about Monadnock Music online at [www.monadnockmusic.org](http://www.monadnockmusic.org).

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