

SPOLETO

FESTIVAL
USA

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For Immediate Release

Geoff Nuttall, 1965–2022

Spoletto Festival USA's renowned Charles E. and Andrea L. Volpe Director of Chamber Music dies at 56.

October 19, 2022 (Charleston, SC) — Violinist music education advocate, and Spoletto Festival USA Charles E. and Andrea L. Volpe Director of Chamber Music Geoff Nuttall died today at his home in California where he was undergoing treatment for pancreatic cancer. He was 56.

From center stage of Charleston's historic Dock Street Theatre, Nuttall hosted the Festival's iconic, twice daily chamber music concerts since 2010, drawing enthusiastic audiences whose devout attendance was owed equally to the series' programming and the dynamism of its host and star performer. As director, he curated each of the 33 annual concerts and performed on many as a violinist and founding member of the St. Lawrence String Quartet, Spoletto's quartet-in-residence, for more than 25 years.

Nuttall began playing the violin at age 8 after moving from Texas to Ontario, Canada. He received his bachelor's degree from the University of Toronto, where he studied under Lorand Fenyves. Shortly after graduating, he co-founded the St. Lawrence String Quartet in 1989. The ensemble swiftly received top prizes at the Banff International String Quartet Competition and the Young Concert Artist Auditions, becoming a fixture at some of North America's most celebrated festivals and concert halls.

St. Lawrence String Quartet is also ensemble-in-residence at Stanford University, where Nuttall served on the music faculty since 1999. With the quartet and as a solo artist, Nuttall played more than 2,000 concerts worldwide to critical acclaim, and was lauded as "intensely dynamic," with "stunning technique and volatility" (*The New York Times*).

Nuttall was named to his role at Spoleto by longtime Festival chamber music director and Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center founder Charles Wadsworth, who first invited Nuttall and the St. Lawrence String Quartet to Spoleto in 1995. Like his predecessor, Nuttall amassed a robust following—audience members who forged a strong connection to Nuttall’s onstage charisma.

The New York Times labeled him “chamber music’s Jon Stewart,” describing Nuttall as a “creatively daring, physically talented performer who can go goofball in a nanosecond, maintaining a veneer of entertainment while educating his base about serious matters...he is subtly redefining what a chamber music concert can be.”

Part of Nuttall’s genius as series host could be found in his pre-performance banter; engaging the audience in revelatory musical learning—facts about the composer or themes to anticipate. While this type of commentary has become de rigueur in many chamber music concert settings, Nuttall’s approach captivated novice listeners and experts alike.

Nuttall’s fervor for the music inspired colleagues both on and offstage. The sense of camaraderie Nuttall created between visiting artists contributed to a celebratory spirit felt in each concert, and a palpable camaraderie among players. He provided a platform for young musicians and composers to flourish. In recent years, next generation titans, including Benjamin Beilman, Anthony Roth Costanzo, Jennifer Frautschi, Arlen Hlusko, James Austin Smith, Paul Wiancko, and JACK Quartet, have appeared onstage in Charleston.

In addition to recording works by such composers as Schumann, Shostakovich, and Tchaikovsky, Nuttall and the St. Lawrence String Quartet were dedicated to the music of Joseph Haydn. In 2020, they were featured on the PBS *Great Performances* series, “Now Hear This,” in an episode that chronicled the composer’s life and work. Nuttall was also a steadfast champion of contemporary composers. He frequently worked with John Adams, Jonathan Berger, and Osvaldo Golijov—and received a Grammy Award nomination for the recording of Golijov’s *Yiddishbuk*.

His passion for new music discovery permeated Spoleto Festival USA’s programming. He often placed contemporary works amongst lesser-known pieces from the canon, and emphatically promoted the works of his players and close friends such as Mark Applebaum, Todd Palmer, Stephen Prutsman, Joshua Roman, and Paul Wiancko. In 2019, Nuttall explained his programming style to *Charleston* magazine: “My closest friends are constantly curious, and I hope my audiences will share my enthusiasm for curiosity.”

In his final days, his wife, the renowned violinist Livia Sohn, who also serves as Spoleto Festival USA Assistant Director of Chamber Music, asked Nuttall if he had any unfulfilled aspirations on his bucket list. With his characteristic humor and grace, Nuttall replied, “my life has been my bucket list.”

In addition to Sohn, Nuttall is survived by their children, Jack and Ellis, as well as his mother and sister.

STATEMENTS

Mena Mark Hanna, Spoleto Festival USA General Director: “This is a loss not just for Spoleto Festival USA, but for music lovers around the world. Geoff was classical music’s greatest showman, eliciting a rowdy, raucous reception to Haydn that would sound more at home in a club than a concert hall. He didn’t care if people were clapping between movements; he didn’t care that people wore shorts and sandals to performances; he didn’t care for the rigid social formalities that govern classical music performance. All he cared about was the communitarian, cathartic power of music. And because of that, he changed chamber music in America.”

Alicia Gregory, Chair of Spoleto Festival USA’s Board of Directors: “Within the remarkable constellation of international talent featured every year at Spoleto Festival USA, Geoff Nuttall was consistently one of its brightest stars. His virtuosic artistry, combined with his deft skill in connecting with both artists and audiences, created transcendent performances. He will be remembered as one of the finest classical musicians and curators of our time.”

A celebration of Nuttall’s life and contributions to Spoleto Festival USA will be part of the 2023 chamber music program.

A selection of images of Geoff Nuttall can be found [at this link](#). Use the password spoletopress. More imagery [here](#).

*Geoff was able to continue living his life as fully as possible under the outstanding and thoughtful care of Dr. Christopher Chen. Geoff’s family has created **The Geoff Nuttall Memorial Fund** to advance Dr. Chen’s cancer research at Stanford University. In lieu of flowers, please consider making a tax-deductible donation. Gifts can be made three ways: 1) Online at memorial.stanford.edu by selecting “Other Stanford Designation” and entering **The Geoff Nuttall Memorial Fund** in the “Other” text box, 2) By check payable to Stanford University with **The Geoff Nuttall Memorial Fund** indicated on the memo line, mailed to Development Services, P.O. Box 20466, Stanford, CA 94309, or 3) By phone at 650-725-4360.*

SPOLETO FESTIVAL USA

Spoleto Festival USA was founded in 1977 by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Gian Carlo Menotti, who sought to create an American counterpart to the annual Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy, that he had founded in 1958. Now approaching its 47th year, Spoleto Festival USA is internationally recognized as America’s premier performing arts festival. For 17 days and nights each spring, Spoleto Festival USA fills Charleston’s historic theaters, churches, and outdoor spaces with performances in opera; theater; dance; and chamber, symphonic, choral, and jazz music. Spoleto’s mission is to present programs of the highest artistic caliber while maintaining a dedication to young artists, a commitment to all forms of the performing arts, a passion for contemporary innovation, and an enthusiasm for providing unique performance opportunities for established artists. Beyond its role as a launching pad for young talent, Spoleto also serves

as a catalyst for cultural change and has aided in Charleston's flourishing as a top arts and culture destination. With General Director Mena Mark Hanna at its helm, the 2023 season takes place May 26 to June 11 in various locations on the downtown peninsula. Spoleto Festival USA is a 501 (c)(3) charitable organization.