

MAINE WOMEN

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SOPHIE DAVIS and the musical ensemble Halcyon

Combining beautiful music and environmental stewardship

BY PAM FERRIS-OLSON

Sailing, swimming, and digging in the mud flats are typical summertime childhood memories made in Maine. For violinist Sophie Davis, now 26, her favorite memories include all those—plus digging through sheet music and playing duets in the kitchen with her older sister Josie. “Maine is a musical place year-round but especially in summertime,” the Waldoboro native says.

After graduating from Watershed School in Camden, Sophie attended Oberlin College and Conservatory in Ohio, where she earned degrees in Violin Performance and in Environmental Studies, with a focus on oceans and climate science. That’s an unusual combination of interests and abilities, but to Sophie, they fit together in satisfying ways.

Sophie, her sister Josie Davis, Colin Wheatley, violist, and Ju Young Lee, cellist, formed the string ensemble Halcyon in 2018, though they had been playing together in various configurations for many years before then. Halcyon has been involved in a number of Maine-centered collaborations focused on climate change awareness. One of these collaborations involved the Halcyon ensemble commissioning

the scientist and artist Jill Pelto to paint “Rising Mitigation,” a watercolor depicting sea level rise in Maine. The concert based around it will be called “Rise Up.” The collaboration was inspired by Samuel Barber’s musical piece “Adagio for Strings.”

“Landmarks” is another program that Halcyon hopes to present in the summer/fall of 2021. It will pair aerial footage of Maine’s coast and mountains with selected musical pieces. These collaborations are important to Sophie and the other ensemble members because they “believe that climate change is one of the most pressing challenges and greatest opportunities our generation faces and that it is our responsibility to respond to it imaginatively. Our goal as a quartet is to use music, art,

and story to inspire our communities to engage with the natural world in ways that celebrate stewardship and respect.”

“The four of us inspire each other musically in ways that feel meaningful and unique. Halcyon has become an outlet for creative and diverse communication between us as musicians and our audiences,” Sophie says. That meaningful communication also connects Sophie to the environment and her love of the ocean. “I strive to incorporate my scientific background into my work with Halcyon, with the goal of using music and art to create a new context for scientific data and the realities of a changing environment.”

As she alludes to above, Sophie has a significant scientific side to her talents, as well as a musical side, and she is always looking for ways to make connections between the two. For example, in addition to playing and performing with Halcyon, Sophie has had opportunities to pursue her scientific interests through the Sea Education Association (SEA) Semester Program. This non-profit educational organization operates two tall ships that conduct scientific research on both the Atlantic and Pacific.

During the winter of 2020, Sophie’s tall ship experience included listening to real-time underwater soundscapes and whale song in the Lesser Antilles. She made recordings and took photographs with a plan to incorporate them into a Halcyon performance. This performance will take place post-COVID-19 when public concerts are once again possible.

In the course of her musical career, Sophie has performed at the Kennedy Center, in the Monte Music Festival in India, and with the Jordan National Orchestra in Amman, Jordan. Sometimes her musical and environmental work have dovetailed, as they do with Halcyon. For instance, she received a Fulbright Research Grant and spent nine months on the



From left, Sophie and Josie Davis performing with Halcyon. Photo by Larry Pritchett



Photo by Jason Paige Smith



Top: Halcyon performing its "Envisioning Change" program for a student audience with art by Jill Pelto. "Envisioning Change" was a multimedia performance project exploring the impacts of climate change on Maine and the Arctic through music, art, data, and story. *Photo by Larry Pritchett*

Bottom left: Sophie Davis, March 2020, aboard the SSV *Corwith Cramer* during a voyage to research whale song and ocean soundscapes.

Bottom right: Sophie Davis listening to real-time underwater soundscapes and whale song off the coast of Guadeloupe.

The voyage was made in collaboration with SEA Semester's C-290 voyage in February and March 2020. *Photos courtesy Sophie Davis*

Polynesian island of the Independent State of Samoa. While there, she performed with the Samoa National Orchestra and was able to explore ways that the arts are used to raise awareness of climate change.

Climate change is a reality for all Samoans, Sophie says. "Artists of all types respond to the challenges they face daily, and the impacts of climate change are experienced regularly. Many of the artists I spoke with used their medium as a way to highlight the realities of lost landscapes and traditions, more frequent

cyclones, and less predictability in natural cycles and phenology. Some did this visually (through tattoo, photography, paintings, or wood carvings), and others through music, song, and story."

Sophie's dedication to performing music intertwines with her love of being on the water. "There's something captivating and alluring about the open ocean and the feelings that come with traveling by water." In addition to being a crew member on tall ships, she has worked with the Pemaquid Oyster Company, where she does everything from drive boats, harvest

and plant oysters, and pack them for sale.

To this day, music helps define her way of being in the world, Sophie says, emphasizing that it is the collaboration that she enjoys. Her earliest experiences of collaboration were playing the violin with her sister. That expanded to playing with others in high school and college, inviting friends to play concerts with her during summertime in Maine, and later forming Halcyon.

Looking back, Sophie doesn't remember any expectation that she or her sister would play an instrument, although the family had a piano, and her mom would pick up a fiddle or guitar on rainy days. Her parents might never have formally studied music, but they enjoyed listening to music. Sophie remembers that her elder sister Josie pestered her parents for music lessons. Josie was six when she began studying. After six months of tagging along to Josie's lesson, Sophie, who was four at the time, began violin lessons of her own.

While she admits that occasionally, "there are days when I don't feel like playing and days when I'd much rather do something else," Sophie says she has never really considered practicing a chore. In high school she practiced several hours a day, and in college her practice time was significantly more.

Mostly, she's chosen to practice early in the morning and be able to "set aside time that feels like my own." Sophie loves having time where she doesn't get distracted by the day's other activities.

As to combining music and environmental science—Sophie wants to keep digging deeper into both, with each interest reinforcing the other in ever-new ways.

This summer and fall, Halcyon has upcoming concerts scheduled in Rockland, Boothbay, North Haven, Rockport, Waldoboro, Searsport, and Mount Desert Island. To learn more about Halcyon and for up-to-date specifics on their upcoming performances, please visit their website, at www.halcyonstringquartet.com. For more on Sophie Davis's artistic process, please listen to the Women Mind the Water Podcast featuring Sophie, available free at womenmindthewater.com.

For more on scientist/artist Jill Pelto, mentioned above, see Maine Women Magazine, November 2020. •

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