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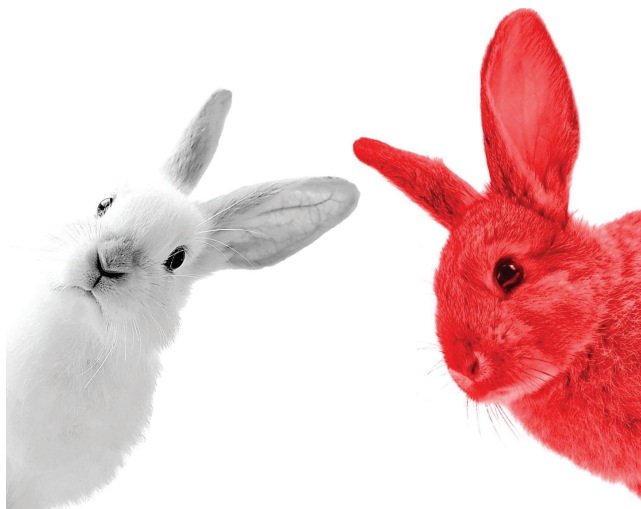
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LAKE CHAMPLAIN WEEKLY



So Far and Yet So Close

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Infusion Baroque. Photo credit: Danylo Bobyk

So Far and Yet So Close
By Benjamin Pomerance

EVERY NOW AND THEN, the world turns upside-down.

The man bites the dog; the priest winds up cleaning out the professional gamblers at the poker table; the gawky kid with the Coke-bottle glasses ends up making the shot that wins the basketball tournament; or Casanova comes away from a love affair with a broken heart. It is this last event that feels most improbable of all, for the globetrotting romantic earned his fame as the ultimate seducer, lacing his scandalous autobiography with enough tales of unbridled passion to make Don Juan blush.

Yet this most famous of all lovers wasn't prepared for Henriette de Schnetzmann. From the window of a coach in Parma, he observed her first in men's clothing, escaping from her family and disguised as an army officer. Later, he saw her in a dress and, as was his custom, flipped head-over-heels for her instantly. With his legendary charm, he won her heart, and a fervent courtship began. "Never," he recalled in florid prose within the pages of his autobiography, did "a folded rose petal come between us to trouble our happiness."

The pinnacle of her attraction to him occurred in a sort of salon, a musical gathering at which a talented performer reeled off a head-spinning rendition of a cello concerto by Antonio Vandini. Perhaps no one in the hall was more surprised than Casanova when the woman whom he had escorted to the affair rose after the performer finished and asserted that she, too, could play the concerto and play it better than the young man whom they had just heard. Everyone in fine society knew, of course, that the cello was not a proper instrument for a lady to play.

Nevertheless, Henriette, undeterred by the gasps, strode to the stage, took the cello, sat down in the chair in a way that proper women were never supposed to sit and indeed delivered a performance of that Vandini concerto that left the crowd of connoisseurs showering her with praise. Casanova was dumbfounded, crying tears of pride over her astonishing feat.

In the Hollywood version of the tale, this would be the moment when everything changed, with the restless man finding lifelong happiness with this woman who was every bit his equal in intellect and beauty. But in a finale worthy of an opera, she stunned him by leaving him in Geneva. From the window of the hotel where they had spent their final night, he looked out to see her carriage depart and saw that she had engraved on the windowpane, with the point of a diamond ring that he gave her, a farewell inscription: "You will forget Henriette."

But Casanova never forgot. Nearly half a century later, in his autobiography, he described their amorous encounter with language throbbing as if it had just happened yesterday. When this tale hit the bookshelves of Europe, young lovers used it as a guide to take their own pilgrimages from Parma to Geneva, trying to find Henriette's engraved message upon the window. Their searches, it appears, were always in vain, but plenty of romances

flourished along these journeys.

And on March 13, more than 250 years after these three months of bliss ended, four musicians in Saranac will once again prove that the world has not forgotten Henriette. On instruments of the era when these lovers roamed Europe, the artists of Infusion Baroque will present one of Antonio Vandini's showstopping sonatas, conjuring shades of that salon where Henriette captured Casanova's heart. Now, just as much as then, their story sings.

It is tales like these that fill the programs of Infusion Baroque, a quartet of McGill University graduates enthralled by the artistry of centuries past and devoted to fresh-eyed presentations of these works that speak to listeners of the present. There is a reflexive image that fills minds when anyone speaks the word "Baroque," a scene of heavily ornamented music played in an opulent palace or a lofty cathedral by men clad in powdered wigs and stiff, formal attire. Indeed, when examining the music of this era, plenty of truth exists in such a portrait.

Yet this picture, while generally accurate, is also incomplete, and Infusion Baroque's musicians savor opportunities to fill in the rest of the scenery. The artists of the Baroque era, a period that stretched from approximately 1600 until the death of J.S. Bach in 1750, were not cardboard cutouts but human beings, filled with the best and the worst impulses of human nature. In the concerts that violinist Sallynee Amawat, flautist Alexa Raine-Wright, cellist Andrea Stewart and harpsichordist Rona Nadler present, this humanity of bygone years lives again.

Their programs tell us, for instance, that the prolific Georg Philipp Telemann betrayed the wishes of his strict Lutheran parents by pursuing a career in music rather than law and that Bach nearly wound up in a duel after calling one of his students a "nanny-goat bassoonist." They recount the rivalries that existed, too, at the court of King Louis XV of France, where Jean-Marie Leclair and Jean-Pierre Guignon battled for the spot of first violin in the court orchestra and where Leclair chose to leave Paris rather than play second fiddle to Guignon for a single month.

For Leclair, the worst was yet to come. On Oct. 23, 1764, his body was found in his home, stabbed to death. Questions of who did it and why remain unresolved to this day. Theories fester, with suspects from a suspicious gardener to the composer's estranged wife. With such juicy fodder, Infusion Baroque has delivered several concerts under the title of "Who Killed Leclair?" in which gorgeous melodies fuse with darker subjects of jealousy, greed and egotism, forming the type of murder mystery that Agatha Christie would have killed for.

Other programs, including the performance that Infusion Baroque will present in Saranac, center on a different message: remembering the ladies. For every Bach,

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Telemann and Leclair of the Baroque period, there were women of comparable talent in both composition and performance. Highly admired during their era, their names are now relegated to history’s fine print, the result of too many chronicles that focused solely on their male counterparts. Here, once again, Infusion Baroque manages to complete the story that posterity has overlooked.

In doing so, the ensemble introduces listeners to Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre, a woman favored for her musical gifts by King Louis XIV every bit as much as the monarch’s better-remembered palace composer, Jean-Baptiste Lully. A child prodigy, she performed on the harpsichord at the age of 5 before France’s luxury-loving “Sun King,” who welcomed her into his court. She remained there until 1684, the year that she married organist Marin de la Guerre, an act that conventional wisdom of the day deemed to be the end of her musical career.

But de la Guerre fooled them all. For the rest of her life, she continued to perform and compose, developing pioneering works in genres ranging from opera to trio sonatas. Decades after her death, the historian John Hawkins wrote that de la Guerre was one of the finest musical writers whom France had ever produced. “So rich and exquisite a flow of harmony has captivated all that heard her,” he proclaimed.

Other tales of this same nature abound. Barbara Strozzi purportedly printed more secular music than any other composer of the period and did so without the benefit of consistent patronage from the nobility. Teresa Milanollo toured Europe’s best venues, hailed as a violinist on par with Niccolò Paganini. Anna Maria della Pietà was abandoned as a child, brought to the doorstep of the orphanage in Venice where Antonio Vivaldi taught and rose to become a star. “When Anna Maria plays,” one commentator wrote, “countless angels dare to hover near.”

It was music of this nature, imbued with the melodies of the angels, that initially attracted Amawat as a summer student at Oberlin College’s Baroque Performance Institute. “It was like a calling to me,” she recalls. “It was like a whole other world had just opened up.” At McGill University, she immersed herself in Baroque violin studies, finding common ground among other pupils who shared her fascination with these centuries-old creations.

Raine-Wright was one of those fellow travelers. One day, over brunch, the two women realized that they had never played a concert together. Raine-Wright reached out to Nadler, with whom she played frequently, and to a cellist who has since departed amicably from the ensemble to pursue a variety of different ventures. Through this initially informal confederation of four Montreal students in 2013, Infusion Baroque was born.

Their entry into the Early Music America Baroque Performance Competition initially seemed equally as informal. “We put together a very simple recording in a church,” Amawat remembers. “But when we listened to the playback of that recording, we were surprised at how well we blended together.” The adjudicators and audience members at the Early Music America competition agreed. By the time the contest was over, the nascent quartet had captured both the grand prize and the audience prize.

Then came the titanic question of what would happen next. Overnight, the competition had catapulted them to the attention of agents, promoters and most of the modern literati in the Baroque music space. Still, Amawat does not recall the foursome ever becoming overwhelmed by their newfound status, preserving a level-headed mindset and a commitment to mutual companionship. “These ladies are my colleagues,” she states, “but also my good friends.”

In 2016, the friendship evolved with Stewart joining the group. The next year, they released their debut album, an elegant rendition of trio sonatas by

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, one of J.S. Bach’s gifted offspring. Since then, critics have labeled them as an ensemble on the rise to the top of today’s Baroque performance landscape, praising their tone, balance and inventiveness. “We are all very sensitive to each other,” Amawat explains of their sustained bonds. “That’s the key, both personally and professionally.”

But there seems to be another key as well: a shared passion for helping listeners grasp that this music and its creators are not so far removed from present-day humanity. In the program that they will perform in Saranac, for example, they will address distinctions between commentaries about women and men in the Baroque period. For the women, observers heaped attention on what clothes they wore and how they comported themselves on stage. In assessments of the male artists of the era, by contrast, the music remained front and center.

Similar threads spin out from there. Baroque writers described a feminine manner of making music — sweet and reserved — and a masculine style, filled with muscularity. The story of de Schnetzmann and Casanova was arguably most remarkable not for de Schnetzmann’s stunning performance, but for the fact that no one stopped her from showing that her skills outshone a man’s abilities. And there was, of course, a rumor mill, one that insisted that many female artists of the era achieved greatness not by talent, but by affairs with powerful men.

Perhaps such storylines strike a recognizable chord. For Infusion Baroque, they feel all too familiar. “When we started touring, people began coming up to us and saying that it was remarkable that we were four women performing together,” Amawat says. “In Montreal, this was never pointed out to us. But on tour, all of this attention started to leave an impression.” After one concert, she recalls, an audience member delivered a startling oration to one of her colleagues: “You girls are great, but it’s too bad that you don’t have any men in your ensemble.”

There were brighter moments, too, like the master class that Infusion Baroque provided to a group of young women studying Bach cantatas, a project that generated thanks from mothers who appreciated that their daughters were able to meet four professional artists who were women. Yet even in these situations, Amawat remembers feeling a bit uneasy about the narrative. “We were honored to be thought of so highly by these parents,” she explains. “But why should four women playing together as professionals be seen as something unusual?”

From such encounters, the musical menu that Infusion Baroque will provide in Saranac came to life. The goal, Amawat states, is to show that first-rate female musicians are not some rare, modern phenomenon, but rather part of a vast lineage that stretches back for hundreds of years. As individuals, de Schnetzmann and de la Guerre, Anna Maria della Pietà and all the other women featured on this program left their earthly existence long ago. Through their music and their lives, however, the relevance of their legacies remains unmistakable.

Which is why, Amawat notes, this concert of music from a distant past is far more than a museum piece. “We’ve come so far,” she points out. “And yet there are some areas in which we still have so far to go.” Through this performance, these women of the Baroque era live again, reminding us of strength despite bias and fortitude despite superficiality. On paper, history tells us that these are works of art from a time far away. To any ears open to listening, though, a different truth awakens us, a recognition that what may seem so far is in reality close indeed.

Hill and Hollow Music will present Infusion Baroque in concert on March 13 at 3 p.m., with a pre-concert talk at 2:15 p.m., at the United Methodist Church on Route 3 in Saranac. For more information, call 518-293-7613, email ambrown.hillholl@gmail.com or visit hillandhollowmusic.org.



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