

# Solange De Santis

## *Tafelmusik – A Baroque Boot Camp*

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TORONTO – Elly Winer, a viola player with Tafelmusik, a Toronto-based baroque orchestra, is teaching a small group of students how to play the viola in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century manner and he appears to be channeling Mozart. Not Wolfgang, but his father Leopold, who was a best-selling author with *A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing* before Wolfgang was born.

To play Beethoven, today's violinist holds the instrument nearly straight out from the shoulder and tucks it under the chin, but the Bach performer points the neck more toward the floor and rests the curved end on the collarbone, Winer notes. "Do you recommend a chin rest?" gravely asks a student. (It's a small piece of curved wood attached to the end of the violin.) "Not at Tafelmusik. Those are really, really modern – they came in around the 1890s," replies Winer, noting that Leopold, "our teacher from 250 years ago," would have had several layers of clothing upon which to rest his instrument. The point is, Winer continues, that the position allows the player to make the round, sweeping movements, using a lighter 18<sup>th</sup>-century bow, that the lively, dancing music demands.

Winer's class was part of a two-week June music program organized by Tafelmusik, a kind of baroque boot camp that included lessons, performances and lectures as well as minuet class for slow-footed, jeans-clad musicians and a screening of *The Madness of King George*. It was attended by about 65 amateur, professional and student musicians and singers from the U.S., Canada, Japan, Israel, Great Britain, Germany and Colombia. It's the kind of initiative that has characterized the creative approach that Tafelmusik and its dynamic American-born artistic director, Jeanne Lamon, have brought to some very old music.

Preparing for its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary next year, Tafelmusik (which means "table music" or music to accompany a dinner) is considered one of the top orchestras in the world that play music composed between 1600 and 1750 on instruments of the period that are either authentic or reproductions. An example would be playing Bach on a harpsichord instead of a piano. The baroque orchestra is also smaller at about 20 members than the modern symphony orchestra with about 100 players.

Since the historical-instrument movement began in Europe around 1950 (the two hundredth anniversary of Bach's death), dozens of chamber music ensembles and baroque orchestras have sprung up, mostly in Europe and North America. Lamon, 53, said the founders of Tafelmusik, a married couple who played woodwind instruments, thought Toronto should have a world-class baroque orchestra "and everyone laughed in their faces."

They held recording sessions at 2 a.m. so there would be less traffic noise outside the church where they were playing, recalled Ivars Taurins, 47, a founding member of the orchestra and conductor of the Tafelmusik Chamber Choir, which accompanies the orchestra on choral pieces. Lamon, who grew up in Larchmont, N.Y., near New York City, was invited to become music director in 1981. She said she fell in love with the violin at the age of three while watching an Isaac Stern performance on television. "I pointed and said 'I want to do that.' It was so obviously my voice," she recalled. While pursuing advanced studies in Amsterdam in the 1970s, she then fell in love with baroque music and the collaborative nature of the smaller orchestra. "The music has a core strength and accessibility that is undeniable and it's fun to discover this old/new music," she said.

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In her 22 years with Tafelmusik, she has built an organization that wins prizes, has made some 60 recordings, regularly tours Europe and the U.S. (they are scheduled to play in New York City, Ithaca, N.Y. and New Haven, Conn. next year) and performs a full fall-spring season in Toronto. Reviewers have noted that Lamon, who conducts while playing the violin, transmits a joy and passion for the music that generates an orchestral sound described as “golden” and “shimmering.”

In some respects, Tafelmusik and the revivalists have done their job too well, with baroque’s greatest hits – think Handel’s *Messiah*, Bach’s *Brandenburg Concertos*, Pachelbel’s *Canon*, Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* – now in danger of becoming numbingly familiar. So Lamon works new twists, keeping the programming interesting.

Take *The Four Seasons*. While Tafelmusik has performed it straight many times, last year Lamon decided to present the piece along with appearances by Inuit throat singers and Chinese pipa players interpreting the theme of the seasons in their cultures. “We tried to put a new perspective on it and not hear it as the same old elevator music,” said Lamon. Each December, Tafelmusik offers a sing-along *Messiah* (in addition to the straight goods) at which audience members join in and Taurins conducts dressed as Handel. He even signs autographs in Handel’s handwriting. “I can do whole sentences in his handwriting,” Taurins said cheerfully.

Now that Tafelmusik has a solid reputation, Lamon, who is single, is thinking of future generations. The Baroque Institute, now in its second year, has foundation support for a third year, but Lamon wants to make it an annual event.

Many participants, including 23-year-old violinist Andrew Fouts of San Rafael, Calif., came away from the event with a glowing passion for baroque. “We’ve been practicing nine hours a day. It’s been just completely hard-core, really intense. It’s nothing you could handle for a longer period of time. But I’m definitely going to search out people in the Bay Area (who play that type of music) when I get home,” he said.

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