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music

Old School

Violinist performs Mozart's music as it was meant to be played
by Rebecca Ragain

Both of Monica Huggett's violins are older than the Constitution of the United States.

The London-born lesbian started out studying the modern form of the instrument, but it was the Baroque violin that captured her attention and earned her career-long loyalty.

Today, in her early 50s, Huggett is one of the world's most recognized practitioners of period violin playing. Much in demand as a soloist, she also performs and records with her ensemble, Trio Sonnerie, with which she won the Gramophone Award for Best Baroque Instrumental Recording of 2002.

She is a founder of the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra in the Netherlands, musical director of the Irish Baroque Orchestra and principal guest director of the Seville Baroque Orchestra in Spain. She is also finishing her 11th season as artistic director of the Rose City's own specialized orchestral group, the Portland Baroque Orchestra.

Huggett is not only passionate about music of the Baroque era but is also a fervent champion of early music as a whole. The term "early music" refers to Western music predating the Classical era, and includes Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque music. The Baroque era—considered to be the last period of "early music"—is commonly defined as ending in 1750 with the death of J. S. Bach.

Baroque performers have been a revitalizing force in Classical music, in Huggett's opinion. She believes instrumental playing became homogenized in the 20th century because of globalization. It became bland, she says, because everyone studied with the great teachers and ended up with the same style.

She explains: "The Russians went to America, the Israelis went to America, and America exported a certain kind of violin playing. What happened was there became a universal style. That never existed before."

Performers of period music "threw everything out" and started again by trying to go back to the roots of the various instruments, says Huggett. Baroque orchestras strive toward authenticity, trying to emulate the way instruments have been played through the ages and to be "a little bit more truthful to what the composer would have heard and what he would have imagined," as she puts it.

For instance, when Huggett directs PBO in a concert, she does it while playing the violin, because that is how it was done in the 18th century when orchestras were smaller. There was no need for a conductor.

Authenticity is also the reason Huggett owns two violins. One is a 1618 instrument made in Cremona, Italy, which she uses when playing 17th century music. She plays 18th century works on a Dutch violin made during the last half of the 18th century, which she acquired from the David Kerr Violin Shop in Southeast Portland.

Both of Huggett's instruments have pure gut strings, whereas the strings of modern violins are wrapped in fine wire. Pure gut strings make a different sound than those with winding, a difference that Huggett struggles to articulate in nontechnical terms.

"It's like speaking a different language, or speaking with a different dialect," she says.



The Portland Baroque Orchestra strives to emulate the way instruments have been played through the ages.

Music aficionados might notice that Baroque music, in general, is clearer and more articulated. Huggett elaborates: "Baroque music comes from dance music, so when it's played on authentic instruments, it has more spring, more dance. It's lighter."

Baroque music does have some shortcomings, like a lack of pieces that challenge the entire orchestra. Rather, the period's focus was largely on concertos for solo instruments. So PBO frequently incorporates Classical music into its performance schedule.

"The Classical era is very interesting instrumentally. It stretches the orchestra, keeps the orchestra on their toes," says Huggett.

PBO's May concert draws from the Classical era. Called *Mozart Celebrated*, the show is part of Portland's Month of Mozart, which local performance groups have organized in honor of the composer's 250th birthday.

The concert will give Portlanders a chance to hear Mozart's music the way it would have been played in his time, by a small orchestra in an intimate setting.

The program includes Mozart's work from three genres: chamber music, concerto and symphony. One of the highlights is his "Concerto for Flute and Harp" from 1778. This piece features PBO's principal flutist, Sonja Boon, on a wooden flute and guest Maria Cleary on the Classical harp.

Cleary, who is Irish and lives in Italy, is well-known as a harpist. When Huggett heard her play, she immediately signed Cleary up to perform with PBO.

"There are hardly any harpists in the world who play this special Classical harp," Huggett points out.

Other works scheduled for the evening are Mozart's "Symphony No. 40 in G Minor" and "Divertimento in D Major for Strings" as well as a late addition by German composer Louis Spohr.

Huggett and Cleary will perform Spohr's work, which Huggett describes as a "potpourri of variations on themes from Mozart's operas."

"We decided it was a bit of a waste to have this Irish harp player come all this way just to play one concerto," recalls Huggett, adding that it has been a "logistic nightmare" to get Cleary and her harp to Portland.



Monica Huggett splits her time among orchestras in the Netherlands, Ireland, Spain and the United States.

Huggett is personally well-acquainted with the trials of traveling; she estimates that she spends 190 nights of the year away from home.

For about three weeks of the year, she works in Portland with PBO. For these trips, she arrives early to attend board meetings and similar necessities.

Prior to the concerts, which usually open on Friday nights, Huggett leads the members of PBO in rehearsals. They practice Monday through Thursday, putting in two or even three five-hour days and one or two half-days.

Although Huggett's Portland visits are full, they are not the most hectic travels that she has experienced. That distinction goes to a particularly overbooked week last year.

Her week started with Trio Sonnerie's concert in the north of England. Then Huggett flew directly to Norway for two days of rehearsal with the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra. She followed that with a concert in Spain with the Seville Baroque Orchestra, then returned to Oslo for a concert the next day. And she had bronchitis during the trip.

Though such a schedule would tax even the most experienced traveler, unexpected developments take on added significance when one leads a performance group.

"It is quite a high-stress life," says Huggett. "Being artistic director or musical director, the buck stops with you. You are responsible for the artistic result."

"You do your absolute utmost, but sometimes situations are against you. You might find you haven't had enough rehearsal time, and it's a very bad venue. Or the first trumpet was stranded in France for an extra day because the French were on strike," she says.

Huggett says planning is important in order to minimize the complications that can arise and to ensure a smooth performance. "You've got to give yourself, and the whole organization, the best chance to produce to a really high artistic standard." jo

Monica Huggett leads PORTLAND BAROQUE ORCHESTRA in *Mozart Celebrated* 8 p.m. May 5 and 6 at First Baptist Church, 909 S.W. 11th Ave., and 3 p.m. May 7 at Reed College's Kaul Auditorium, 3203 S.E. Woodstock Blvd. Tickets are \$15-\$39 from 503-222-6000 or www.pbo.org. Huggett's recordings are available at Classical Millennium.

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