

Elinor Frey



Small Wonder

Elinor Frey explores piccolo cello on album of early Italian concertos

BY GREG CAHILL

Ask Elinor Frey what sparked her interest in early music, and the Canadian-American cellist and researcher cites not sheet music, but a yearning for self-discovery. “The cello’s earliest music came from Italy, and I wanted to go there and to learn the language,” she says. “What really hooked me was how knowing about the stories of musicians in the past changed what I felt and how I played their music. It was an intoxicating process of constant transformation that I wanted to keep exploring—the early music community is full of curious people.

“Playing early music helped me look for a broader and more varied approach to being a professional musician. Instead of being on a ladder, where Casals is at the top, I stepped off and tried to find what Elinor does well and how I can make my own contribution.”

What this Montreal resident and graduate of McGill University’s acclaimed early music program does well is to make ancient works relevant beyond a small circle of cognoscenti. “She is one of a growing number of

younger performers who can make period instrumental solos sizzle with the same heat as artists using modern instruments and bows,” noted John Terauds of the *Toronto Star*, acknowledging Frey’s assured technique and natural-sounding musicality.

Having spent the better part of 18 months in Covid lockdown at her apartment near the banks of the St. Lawrence River, Frey emerged from seclusion in 2021 to record an album of early Italian cello concertos by Vivaldi, Leo, Sammartini, and Tartini. “We explore the unique and captivating sound world of the violoncello family in a period when composers were writing ‘galant’ melodies, and we enjoy the rich harmonies and expressive counterpoint associated with Baroque music,” she writes in the liner notes. “This recording, a collaboration with the ensemble Rosa Barocca, contributes to current research on the Baroque cello by performers and musicologists and is dedicated to concertos that have sparked an interest in the smaller violoncello of the late-Baroque era.”

Frey's collaboration with the period-instrument ensemble Rosa Barocca, from Calgary, Canada, came after playing a concerto concert with the group two years ago. "We had such good chemistry that I thought we'd be a good match for a big CD project," she explains. "The Rosa players were marvelous: Each one came with really important points and questions and contributions. The project wouldn't be the same quality without every single one of them. And the director, Claude Lapalme, led us with such good humor! He also knew how to bring a better and better performance out of each hour we spent together. We shared in a kind of joyful rigor for which I am very grateful."

This is Frey's first recording with the piccolo cello, an instrument that is not well known within the broader string community. "I wanted to find an instrument that would work well for playing violin music—I love the violin repertoire," she says. "The small violoncello has a range one octave below the violin and is the size of today's standard 3/4 cello, so I can stretch to large intervals more easily. Its sound is really interesting; not a viola, not a typical cello, but something else! I'm often inspired by sound and find that different instruments bring out different qualities in the music. I also played the Tartini concerto with an underhand bow grip. These different possible colors help us see the incredible variety inherent in early Italian cello music."

On the recording, Frey uses both a full-sized cello and a piccolo cello. "Two of the album's concertos are performed on the small violoncello," she says. "In the case of the Sammartini Concerto in C major, the words 'cello piccolo'—a later addition—are written on the manuscript, and the solo part is written in treble clef, to be performed an octave down, a practice that became the notational norm from the 1760s on. For Tartini's A major concerto, the solo instrument is unspecified in the score but is notated throughout in tenor clef and suits the tuning G-D-a-e exceptionally well. The range of the solo part never descends below G, the lowest string of this small cello. . . . Another potential source of repertoire for the small violoncello is music written for the violin. Within the exploration of Italian cello concertos on this album, we inserted two movements from violin sonatas by Giuseppe Tartini, excerpts from his collection of the *Sonate Piccole*. Tartini remains one

of history's most celebrated violinists and composers and is also known for his experimentation with instrument technology and for his many treatises that take a remarkably scientific approach to violin playing, harmony, and composition."

On the album, Frey plays a small 1770 cello made by Matthäus Friedrich Scheinlein of Nürnberg, Germany. The larger cello heard on the recording was made a few years ago by Karl Dennis of Warren, Rhode Island. "So one is old, the other is new," she says. "Both so resonant and distinctive!"

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Born and raised in Seattle, Washington, Frey began playing cello at age 8. "My aunt, Barbara Thornton, was a celebrated singer of medieval music, and her presence in my life as a child and young musician was very inspiring," she recalls. "In recent years, I have rekindled a close friendship with her partner, the singer Benjamin Bagby, who now plays an avuncular role in my life and encourages me very much."

Her parents—a Shakespeare professor and writing instructor—were educated in music

as children. "My father has a beautiful bass voice and my mother has an ear for music—she understands the different composers and has an innate feeling for the arts. The way they read out loud is very musical," she says. "My family valued words: All of us read a lot and my parents and one of my sisters are writers. My twin sister is a world-class athlete—ultimate frisbee—and someone who expressed her artistry through sports and community leadership. As a child I was often near nature, and I played many sports. I cannot underestimate the influence of the rhythms of the ocean or the colors of the trees or the exhilaration of kicking a ball and how that informed my artistry."

At age 5, she saw a cello at a concert and was captivated by it. "It was a string quartet concert and the only woman onstage was playing cello—an example of the importance of representation," she says. "I loved how it sounded, and I felt this immediate identification with the cello. I kept asking for it, and when my parents finally rented one, it was my 'special' thing—I was very possessive about it and way into it. I wouldn't let my sisters touch it! I loved many things as a kid, but music really got to me. Music was magical and comforting."

Through the cello, Frey went to private teachers, music festivals, college, and university—including the Mannes School of Music, the Juilliard School, and McGill University—earning her bachelor's, master's, and doctorate. "I learned so much at these places and institutions," she says. "But I have to say that sometimes I learned just as much from trying to solve problems that weren't addressed in school. I often had mentors and teachers on the 'outside.' I've learned a lot from reading, too, and one very important part of my development has been observing great musicians close-up. I learned that visiting the home of someone I admire and seeing their workspace, learning about their daily routine and their process, and how they spend their money and time has been so helpful. I understood more *how* they became so accomplished."

Her main teachers have been Meg Brennand, Craig Weaver, Barbara Stein Mallow, Hans Jørgen Jensen, Bonnie Hampton, Matt Haimovitz, Susie Napper, and Paolo Beschi, but her lessons have never stopped. "Most recently I am learning about



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the Dounis method from Byron Duckwall, and my longtime mentor for all things history of cello is Marc Vanscheeuwijck,” she explains. “I also learn a lot from the luthiers and bow makers I work with. Lastly, playing new music teaches me so much about my instruments. So fascinating!”

“My career is very Elinor,” she says. “It is the product of a distinct combination of the things I value. I have played a lot of chamber music and also enjoy playing with larger ensembles, but mostly I like to dream up, research, organize, and lead or collaborate in the performance of early cello music. This means commissioning a new work for three Baroque cellos on one day and touring a Boccherini flute quintet on another day.”

She performs as a soloist throughout North America and Europe, as well as with her quartet, Pallade Musica. A passionate educator, she teaches early cello at the University of Montréal, lectures at McGill University, and is a visiting fellow in music at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University. During the early months of the pandemic, she presented online concerts and virtual master classes.

She recorded her first album in 2008 on Yarlung Records in Los Angeles. “I did mostly new music, including a piece dedicated to me by the late Steven Stucky,” she says. “Steve was a great friend and mentor and missed by so many.”

While Frey is deeply committed to early music, devoting endless hours to researching each piece, she sees a strong link between practitioners of Baroque music and both classical and modern music. “I think that performance-practice devotees find inspiration in the remarkable sounds of period instruments,” she says. “I think, however, that ‘modern’ musicians also try to make a convincing and well-researched performance. There is not such a divide, in my opinion. We are all motivated by the rewards of understanding that music is not merely for passive enjoyment of beauty but also that the music communicates ideas, often in a shared language. This means that we are all committed to re-examining the many surface details that add up to a strong communicative performance.”

With the tentative relaxation of pandemic restrictions, Frey hopes to resume her formerly active performance and recording schedule. “The lockdown accelerated a transformational process I was already embarking on: learning more about what I truly value as an artist and teacher and letting myself focus on my unique contribution. The lockdown also gave me the time to dig deep into understanding more about cello technique and certain repertoire—especially Bach—that I wanted to get to know on a much more extensive and wholehearted level,” she says. “That meant working on my memory, my bow hold, my sound, my knowledge of rhetorical interpretation, and so on.”

In March, Frey plans to spend a month as a visiting researcher at the Orpheus Institute in Ghent, Belgium, learning and practicing the cello sonatas of Jean Baur, music from about 1750 in Paris. “I want to understand more about the cello after Vivaldi, but before Boccherini and Haydn,” she says. “Already dozens of sonatas had been written for it, but the cello was still a newly popular instrument, and composers and performers were experimenting quite a lot with its colors. I want to make many albums of interesting music. I want to lead projects where musicians are challenged to learn new techniques or refine their art, and where they can change their ideas about how music could be played by experimenting and creatively engaging with research. I also want to support today’s professional and soon-to-be professional musicians and help them reach their highest potential. This is through lessons and courses, but also by creating events and opportunities for them to grow.

“And I want to be onstage every week! I will do a tour of a program dedicated to Boccherini’s chamber music next October. I just adore Boccherini—what charm! We’ll play flute quintets and more, visiting Canada’s two coasts—I might add a few more dates if I have time to plan. I’m also performing the Bach cello suites quite often these days. I like being part of an event where people can run into each other unexpectedly, observe each other, see a musician onstage in the flesh, and participate in the ritual of leaving the house and entering a beautiful space like a concert hall or church to share an experience together. This feels really great!”



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WHAT ELINOR FREY PLAYS

INSTRUMENTS

- Six-string viola da gamba: Francis Beaulieu, 2021 (Montréal)
- Viola d’arco: Roland Suits, 2018 (Estonia)
- Four-string Baroque large violoncello: Karl Dennis, 2017 (Warren, Rhode Island)
- Five-string Baroque cello: Francis Beaulieu, 2012 (Montréal)
- Modern cello: Mario Gadda, 1962
- American church bass (Yankee viol): Abraham Prescott, 1820 (Concord, New Hampshire)
- Four-string small violoncello: Matthäus Friedrich Scheinlein, 1770 (Nürnberg, Germany)

BOWS

- Early-18th-century bow (screw in): Gerhard Landwehr, 2021
- 1747 Nicolas Pierre Tourte model: Marie-Eve Geeraert, 2021
- Viola da gamba bow (clip in): Pieter Affourtit, 2020
- “Underhand” cello bow: Antonino Airenti, 2017
- Short bow (clip in): Pieter Affourtit, 2017
- Modern cello bow: Charles Espey, 2006