

Laura McPheeters Profile

Vancouver cellist Laura McPheeters faces a dilemma that is common to freelance artists: how to distribute your attention between raising a family and pursuing a vocation that demands so much focus. With her daughter in daycare, McPheeters has a rare moment to get contemplative. “I sometimes think about quitting music altogether. I had Clara three years ago, and ever since then I’ve been divided in my time, and it’s really hard to look after her and do music, and do them both well,” she reflects. McPheeters’ attitude is characteristic of a musician who takes both her craft and her personal life seriously, an attitude that is reflected by her success as a performer.

After finishing her graduate studies, the young cellist began looking for opportunities to make her practicing pay off, and that meant taking any small gigs that were offered. “I never really thought about doing orchestral auditions before the last 2 or 3 years. In a way, the universities didn’t really train us to become orchestral musicians. There was just the assumption planted in our heads that an orchestra job was what you get if you’re a string player, that’s what you do,” McPheeters admits with some irony. A fortunate posting as Assistant Principle cellist in the orchestra for *Showboat* opened the door to other freelance work with the CBC Radio Orchestra, the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, and the Vancouver Opera Orchestra.

In 1996 McPheeters filled an opening in the popular Vancouver chamber ensemble Joe Trio, a lighthearted piano trio including violinist/composer Cam Wilson, and pianist Alan Stiles. Joe Trio already had an established touring schedule when she joined, so she quickly found herself adjusting to life on the road. “I don’t mind that my employment is crammed into really intense periods. With Joe Trio, for one or two months on the road, 24 hours a day I’m away from home and I’m working. But then for the other ten months of the year I’m only working sporadically, and that’s okay. It’s really nice, it’s a good schedule, but it’s hard on my personal life to be away from the family for that long. But I like it though,” she smiles.

Joe Trio recorded its first CD, “A Cup of Joe,” in 1997, shortly after McPheeters joined the group. This fall they will release their second album, “Set ‘em Up, Joe,” recorded by CBC Records. Part of the group’s appeal has been their mixed repertoire, made up of traditional piano trios and Cam Wilson’s arrangements of popular melodies. “We do have to keep in mind that most of our audiences, when we’re on tour, are over 60, and they love that stuff, they love just a really pretty tune... In a lot of the towns that we go to, people that are coming to the concert aren’t classical music listeners. It’s kind of a nice coincidence that we don’t want to play classical music for the whole concert, and also they don’t want to hear it for the whole concert,” McPheeters muses.

Playing with Joe Trio also required the cellist to explore aspects of performance that didn’t always have to do with her chosen instrument. Some of Wilson’s lighter arrangements include singing, whistling, and even storytelling. “We’re extremely goofy onstage sometimes, and some people just wouldn’t want to do that,” McPheeters says with a laugh. Having the temperament to not take herself so seriously as a classical

musician has helped her longevity with the group, but she admits that her more sober nature also keeps them on track. “We have an interesting balance in the trio...I tend towards playing more classical music, and Cam tends towards wanting to play his stuff. I think it works really well together.”

When not touring, McPheeters can also be heard with the Helikon ensemble, a new music group she co-founded with percussionist Nicholas Coulter, clarinetist Karen Noel-Bentley, flautist Chenoa Anderson, pianist Leslie Dala, and conductor Wallace Leung. The group came together during a performance of Peter Maxwell Davies’ *Eight Songs for a Mad King*, and they all decided that the ensemble, with the inclusion of violin, would adapt well to playing many classic 20th century chamber works. Their first concert included a rare presentation of Arnold Schönberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*. The collective also looks forward to creating new works by Canadian composers, and will have the opportunity to premiere a new chamber opera by Brian Current, in an Opera Breve production next spring.

While McPheeters may not have foreseen where her career would end up when she began playing the cello, her dedication to the artform and to her fellow musicians has enabled her to join the ranks of many talented local artists. Life as a freelancer holds no guarantees, but Laura McPheeters’ outlook remains philosophic: “Sometimes you get pushed in directions you never think of, and they end up being really rewarding.”