

## **Ensemble playing as inspiration – The American trio “Music of the Spheres”**

Kepler’s *Music of the Spheres* – this conjures images of lonely organists in Gothic cathedrals, reminds us of Gregorian hymns and the crystal-clear voices of boy’s choirs. Clearly, the three lively ladies who make up the Baroque trio of this name stand in somewhat of a contrast to such associations. Granted, Jeanne Johnson (Baroque violin), Joanna Blendulf (Baroque cello), and Yuko Tanaka (harpsichord) are fully capable of playing tranquil, floating lines. But below this surface, each measure has an undercurrent of great vivacity, and the ensemble’s performance continually brims with emotion.

Admittedly, one is immediately led to think “how typically American!” But what does “typically American” mean in Early Music? Too much vibrato, a weak sound, smoothed-out jumps, one-dimensional dynamics? None of this applies to *Music of the Spheres*. Quite the opposite is true. The two strings play for the most part almost entirely without vibrato. The violin strikes the ear as very clear, almost edgy at times. At the same time, wonderfully developed melodic lines create a rounded timbre, and skillful ornamentation adds to a vibrant, interesting sound. The cello appears softer and smoother but can likewise be edgy in between. Finally, the harpsichord, though not afraid of sweeping movements in solo passages, tends to be restrained. The result is a sound which, in spite of its emotionality, at no time veers off into exaggeration or kitsch. Rather, *Music of the Spheres* sounds like one would expect a Baroque ensemble to sound, whether European or American.

It came as no surprise then that *Music of the Spheres* gave its European debut on no less an occasion than the Tage Alter Musik Regensburg, one of the most renowned Early Music festivals on the continent. In their performance, they traced the development of the sonata from its early-Baroque form, with its looser, more improvisational character, to its high-Baroque manifestation, with its rather formalized structure. Obviously, the program was put together according to musicological criteria. At the same time, it contained enough Baroque music hits to avoid a dry, intellectual effect. This careful balance of emotional and intellectual mastery can surely be considered one of the trio’s most intrinsic characteristics.

This balance is reflected in the story behind the trio’s name as told by Jeanne Johnson, violinist and founder of the group. “I chose the name *Music of the Spheres* from a paper I’d written on the subject at Indiana University. In the paper, I analyzed a work of Boethius (one of the fathers of music theory who developed several teaching methods for the monks at his monastery). It struck me that the term ‘music’ denoted a much wider concept in the middle ages than it does today. It referred to a cosmic harmony (of sun, moon, stars, and planets), as well as to a harmony of the various elements of the human body. I believe that music has the power to heal people emotionally, to create more harmony in human beings, and even to create a more harmonious world. To express all this, *Music of the Spheres* seemed a perfect choice for our group name – one that means a lot to me personally.”

It was pure chance that brought the three musicians together. “Jeanne and I met at the Bloomington Early Music Festival at Indiana University,” Joanna recalls. Both Joanna and Jeanne attended Indiana University and participated in the Early Music Institute, but at different times. Jeanne in turn met harpsichordist Yuko at the Carmel Bach Festival. In each case, it was love at first tone. Eventually, Jeanne asked the two whether they’d like to form a chamber music ensemble. “Joanna and Yuko were the musicians I most wanted to play with,” she says. “Unfortunately, we live in opposite corners of the country. But I played a lot in California at that time, so it wasn’t that much of a problem to practice together. Our first performance was a fringe concert at the 2000 Berkeley Early Music Festival.”

This first public appearance was soon followed by many others, including the Bloomington Early Music Festival, the San Francisco Early Music Society, and the aforementioned TAGE Alter Musik – to name only the most renowned events. Currently, the trio is preparing for their New York debut at the Frick collection. And as though this were not enough, two albums have been released in the last two years.

As a consequence, Music of the Spheres occupies more and more space in the life of the three musicians -- still not enough, in their opinion. “All of us play in various ensembles and orchestras,” says Joanna Blendulf, including Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, Tafelmusik, Apollo’s Fire, Boston Baroque, Bloomington Baroque, New York Collegium, American Bach Soloists, Musica Angelica, Musica Pacifica, El Mundo, Ensemble 6–4–2, Moscow Chamber Orchestra, The Women’s Philharmonic, and Camerata Pacifica Baroque, and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. “It goes without saying that we travel a lot with these different ensembles,” Joanna Blendulf adds. Jeanne Johnson is involved in many chamber music projects outside the trio, but also spends much of her time teaching. “I taught in a college in Atlanta for several years and give private lessons at home.”

All three of them also play modern instruments. “I started with modern violin at the age of five,” Jeanne recalls, “but even as a child I liked medieval and renaissance music a lot, and at some point I realized that Baroque violin really suited me.” Therefore, during her time at Indiana University and New England Conservatory, she studied Baroque violin as well as modern.

Joanna, who was born in Sweden, studied cello and viola da gamba at the Cleveland Institute of Music and Indiana University. Yuko Tanaka first earned a Ph.D. degree in Early Music at Stanford University; she then went to Europe to study with Gustav Leonhardt in Amsterdam and Ketil Haugsand in Oslo.

“Whenever we play together, we have this extraordinary experience of inspiration,” Joanna tries to explain the fascination which the ensemble exerts upon them.” Yuko states, “We work well as an ensemble – but on the other hand, I never feel restricted, only free.” Jeanne comments along similar lines: “We’re all musicians that want to keep getting better all the time. It’s an exciting experience.”

The concert programming mostly rests with Jeanne. “I choose the violin pieces, but of course, Yuko and Joanna choose their solo pieces.” These programs do not aim at aesthetic perfection as an end in itself. “We believe that music casts its spell by arousing strong emotions and memories in both listeners and performers alike. People who don’t care for classical music often change their minds after they experience an intense personal and emotional connection to a piece,” Jeanne explains. The three musicians therefore strive to give not only informative and technically mature performances, but also lively shows that entertain. “I think that in this way you often reach people who otherwise would not be interested in this kind of music at all.”

For Music of the Spheres “this kind of music” means Baroque music above all else. “We frequently play Baroque programs with a lot of Schmelzer, Biber, and Bach,” says Jeanne. “Yuko and I also did a program almost exclusively by Pandolfi Mealli. But we also want to get into some classical literature with fortepiano and plan to do that in the future. We’d love to do even more with Music of the Spheres. We’d like to make more recordings. And we’d love to give more performances in Europe. Wherever our presence is requested – we’ll be there!”