



PERFORMER CORNER

Jelloslave

by Colleen Bertsch



Two classically trained women with the need for musical freedom are daring to combine their love of the cello with new ways to make music and new ways of understanding “other” sounds that cellos can make. Jacqueline Ferrier-Ultan and Michelle Kinney are Minneapolis cellists who are making connections with the area’s big names in new, jazz, and rock music. With these friends, Jelloslave ended up creating a new CD *Touch It* that was just released in February of 2006.

Although they found kindred spirits in each other’s love for new music, each had her own path to take to reach the ranks of professional musicians. Jacqueline hails from a musical and creative family where every sibling plays an instrument. Her father Lloyd Ultan was a music professor and philosopher at the University of Minnesota. Concerts, recitals and visits from prominent musicians were regular occurrences in the Ultan household. Earning a masters degree in cello performance from Yale was almost an accident for Jacqueline since she was simply put on that path from an early age.

Michelle on the other hand was planning on going to college to become a professional skier. While in her freshman year, she busted a knee and was forced to decide on a new direction. Luckily, she had a great foundation in cello due to the excellent teachers her parents had found for her while growing up. Knowing that she didn’t want to go for a performance degree, Michelle decided on a combined ethnomusicology-jazz-composition path at Northwestern while taking lessons from a Chicago Symphony member.

After graduating from their respective schools, both women found themselves in Minneapolis. Michelle was quick to jump into the new music scene playing with rock bands and large improv combos comprised of strings, horns and drums. Jacqueline on the other hand was disillusioned after graduating. “I had no concept of what a career for me was going to look like. I knew

that I didn’t want to play in a professional orchestra and I didn’t want to teach university,” she said, so she quit playing for two years. It was the opportunity to play with her sister, violinist Wendy Ultan, which got her back into playing and interested in playing new music with multi media and dance projects.

The Jelloslave concept is *freedom*. This freedom actually takes different shape within various musical ideas, set tonal or textural contexts, and sometimes with no boundaries at all. The point is to never say no, always in service to the music.

Let me back up and explain that what you hear in Jelloslave are dive bombs, creaks, warbles, beautiful melodic lines turned quirky, slaps, and non-tonal rhythmic ideas inside a musical composition. Each piece is different. Track one on their *Touch It* CD has a computer generated “soundscape” (think landscape) that was created by their friend Tom Hambleton who writes film scores and avant guard music. On top of that foundation, the cellists added sounds, some tonal and some textural, to what he created. On another track, the women combined a Bach Invention with an Indian-inspired Beatles tune by George Harrison. In this case, the tunes are completely recognizable, but are stretched and mixed into a fresh interpretation.

In other words, Jacqueline and Michelle’s job is to come up with new sounds and new ways of putting sounds together. For many of us classical types, this would mean an overhaul on how we think about music and how we tell the difference between “right” sounds and “wrong”

sounds. The Jelloslave way is to keep having new ideas, even when you are not certain that they are going to work. The name Jelloslave came from the idea that you can throw just about anything into jello and it will taste good!

Of course you need a foundation to start from — the gelatin, if you will — which would include knowledge of your instrument’s characteristics, and musical concepts such as keys and meters to work within. Tonally, Jelloslave takes improvisation concepts from folk, rock and jazz. They are big proponents of knowing the circle of fifths and patterns on the fingerboard.



Jacqueline Ferrier-Ultan and Michelle Kinney

From that point, the craziness starts. Texturally, Jelloslave does things that rarely, if ever, cross the classical path. They pull the strings down by the bridge while bowing, slide in intervals, slide the thumb position around, scrape close to or behind the bridge, use ricochet bowings, tap on the body, and blow “raspberries” on the back of their

instruments. All of this is within an improvised context. They figure out the time and place for it, but do not plan what they are going to do exactly. This keeps things fresh and exciting. It also means that they have to be entirely in the moment during a performance so that they can act and react to what is going on around them. Michelle’s description is lovely: “It’s like dance; you are performing a gesture”.

Finding inspiration and mentorship is helpful in gaining confidence in a new endeavor. For Jelloslave they found vision in trailblazer Tom Cora. Tom was (he passed away at the age of 44) a self-taught cellist coming from a background in guitar. His

openness to the possibilities of the cello put him in high demand as a performer across the country. Knowing his limitations (he started at age 23 and never studied classically) he focused on music and sound and figured out how to get what he wanted from the cello — rather than the other way around. Tom had no performance boundaries. A perfect example was the two hot-wheels racetracks he had running down his old beautiful cello. During a performance, he would rev up a hot-wheels car and place the spinning tires on his tailpiece's amplified pickup . . . you might want to take caution

before sharing this with your students!

As teachers themselves, Michelle and Jacqueline play recordings for students who express interest in alternative genres of music and encourage them to play along to any type of music they love to listen to. Spending time with just the instrument and exploring its possibilities is the first step of improvisation. Then while listening to a favorite recording, try to find the tonal center of a song. Add a cool rhythm that fits with the music. It can be as simple as that.

You can read more and download music samples of Jelloslave on the internet at www.jelloslave.com.

Their debut CD *Touch It* can be found at Electric Fetus in Minneapolis or ordered from their website.

A former public school string educator in the Twin Cities area, Colleen Bertsch now maintains a private violin studio in northeast Minneapolis. She performs with the Ethnic Dance Theatre and is the fiddle player for Orkestar Bez Ime, an international folk-dance band that specializes in Balkan and eastern European music. You can visit their website at www.rogoria.com. ♪