



PERFORMER CORNER

Cheryl Paschke: Metamorphosis of Educator into Performer

by Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes

Those who have known Cheryl Paschke over the years think of her as one of the premiere string music educators in Minnesota, first by creating magnificent, far-reaching and innovative programs for her Minneapolis Public Schools orchestra students (that also reached far into her schools and community at large), and then even more broadly through her work as the district's arts coordinator. She seems to be no less busy since her retirement from MPS in 2005, but the nature of her activities has transformed her from a respected educator into a respected performer, most notably in the realms of Swedish and Finnish folk music, which she performs on the family violin and her nyckelharpa.

Like so many of us, Cheryl was introduced to the violin in public school, as a 4th grader at Minneapolis' Windom Elementary School, listening to one of those ubiquitous string instrument demonstrations presented by then-orchestra teacher Howard Evenson. Immediately attracted to the instrument, she started to play violin in her school's orchestra program, and not long afterward was studying violin privately with Merle Adams (retired member of the Minneapolis Symphony) and soon after that playing with the Metropolitan Youth Symphony. Cheryl continued studying violin (and viola as well) throughout her public school years, and then at Augsburg College. As she prepared her senior recital she was looking for an alternative way to spend time practicing something other than her recital program, so she decided to experiment with fiddling. Some lessons at the West Bank School of Music were fun and served her immediate purpose, but she really didn't do anything more with it for several years, when she took a summer fiddling workshop with renowned local ethnomusicologist Alan Kagan. Cheryl discovered that fiddle tunes in "old style" tradition were a great addition to her orchestra teaching, as an alternative means to teach right and left techniques with appealing melodies. "Good fiddle tunes," she explains, "are around

generation after generation because they are memorable—sometimes predictable, sometimes not—which can make them memorable yet again!"

Through using fiddling in her teaching she came to meet other local fiddlers, and because of her own heritage began to explore Swedish folk music. Thus on a trip to Sweden several years later she fully expected to participate in local fiddle festivals. However much to her surprise the fiddling tunes she heard were not the same ones she'd been learning at home; instead of the more modern, Swedish-American *dance* tunes she'd already learned, it was the older, more traditional Swedish *fiddling* tunes that were in vogue at the time. So upon returning home she found people playing these traditional Swedish fiddle tunes and began to explore this tradition as well.

In 1977 Cheryl's mom took her first trip to Sweden and saw the most amazing-looking, fiddle-like instrument she'd ever seen, with "extra strings like a hardanger fiddle, but not the same as that." She couldn't describe it, she didn't know the name of it, but she knew that if Cheryl saw and heard one she'd want one. Sure enough, in 1981 on a joint trip to Sweden, right inside the entrance to an outdoor music festival there stood a group of musicians playing this very unusual instrument, the nyckelharpa. Offered the opportunity to try it out, she looked up to her mom and said, "You're right; I do want one!" Her fascination with the nyckelharpa continues to be its wonderful sound. With four bowed and 12 sympathetically vibrating strings, any note that you play in the western scale has a corresponding string vibrating freely, creating a resonant wash of sound. The strings are

depressed with keys rather than directly, so that even the little clicking sound from the key mechanism is part of the instrument's unique and charming sound. Even today Cheryl finds the special sound and look of the nyckelharpa to be particularly fun to perform and to share with people.

Performing is networking, so in short measure Cheryl managed to connect with local Finnish folk musicians, who welcomed

her to play with and learn from them. She found a special affinity for Finnish music because the more "eastern-European sounding" tonalities and chord progressions were different and more complex than those of the Swedish traditions. She found



The Twin Cities Nyckelharpalag

the Finnish dances (and dance tunes) to be quite riveting.

All of these discoveries occurred while Cheryl was still active in the orchestra classroom and later as an administrator, so she cherished the opportunities to be "on the other side of the baton" in community orchestras as well as in the "work-it-out-yourself" world of choosing tunes and creating arrangements in folk ensembles. As most artists with a "day job" know, her ability to do it all fluctuated wildly, depending on circumstances. She described times when it felt important *not* to be in the office at 7:30 on a Tuesday night, and so throughout her career at MPS she did whatever she could to get an instrument in her hands and make music.

Retiring from MPS in 2005 transformed Cheryl from a musician who was primarily an educator to one who is primarily a performer, simply by shifting her strongest attention to the music she had discovered and had been cultivating to the best of her ability all those years at the school district. Perhaps her most prominent performing

work these days is with *Finn Hall*, a Twin Cities-based band committed to preserving the Finnish-American heritage of dance hall music which was very popular in these communities from the late 19th through mid-20th centuries. The band today is comprised of Cheryl (playing nyckelharpa and violin), mandolinist Ralph Tutilla and two accordionists Dennis Halm and Al Reko. They developed their place in the local musical landscape during the 1980s as *Minnesota Pelimannit* (Minnesota Musicians), but began to receive special notice for their prominent role in a popular 1997 television broadcast, *The Old Finn Hall Variety Show*. This charming film recreated the panoply of artistic, cultural and political events typical of the *Finn Halls*, which sprang up across the U.S. wherever populations of Finnish-Americans existed. Out of this experience the band became known as *Finn Hall*, and they continue to perform extensively, mostly throughout the Midwest, but also abroad in Finland. They have also recorded two popular CDs. Their touring schedule is due to expand as they were recently named the Finlandia Foundation's 2010 "Performer of the Year," which will help enable them to tour and perform extensively throughout the U.S. during 2010.

The *Twin Cities Nyckelharpalag* (Twin Cities Nyckelharpa Ensemble) is one several

Swedish folk music ensembles in which Cheryl participates, while one of the great joys of her involvement with Swedish and Finnish folk music is the ability to regularly perform with and learn from world-class Swedish and Finnish folk musicians, in ways that would simply not be possible in the classical music world. Just this past fall she hosted Finnish master fiddler Arto Järvelä, and then *Riksspelman* (Swedish National Fiddler) Leif Alpsjö in concerts, workshops and master classes throughout the Twin Cities metro region.

Cheryl finds her playing level continuing to evolve as she focuses on the performing part of her life. There's always more repertoire to learn and technique to develop, and it's especially gratifying to learn and perform by interacting intensely with wonderful musicians, both here and abroad. The other great delight of "retirement" is simply being able to practice and rehearse during the day rather than trying to squeeze in playing time whenever a moment of free time presents itself, almost always in the dark of night! Cheryl has also begun to teach privately again, and to enjoy learning from her teaching as well, something she simply did not have time to do for many years.

So what is important for somebody who is not familiar with Swedish and Finnish folk music to know? Each folk music

tradition has interesting and unique sounds, textures, dances and rhythmic patterns. The music of both cultures is extremely well researched and there is a very strong commitment within both countries to document the traditions, in both written and recorded formats. Audio recordings from 100 years ago and video recordings from more recent times are readily available, and archives are continually being developed and made available to the public. Both Swedish and Finnish folk music are aural traditions, so much of the teaching and learning is done by listening. However with such careful documentation printed materials are readily available as well. (These are typically used as a reference or reminder of what has been learned by hearing, rather than by learning and performing from the printed page.) Cheryl finds one of the great pleasures of these aural musical traditions is the ability to find tunes in common with any player within those traditions, anywhere, any time—music stands or printed music are never needed to make music! For more information Cheryl suggests visiting the American Nyckelharpa Association website at www.nyckelharpa.org for some great links, the Finnish Music Information Centre at www.fimic.fi, and *Finn Hall's* website at www.finnhall.com.

Elizabeth Prielozny Barnes works extensively with extraordinary musicians outside of the classical music realm. She created Vox Corda (voice of the string), as a way to explore all genres of acoustic string music and to offer another facet of string music advocacy. †



Leif Alpsjö and Cheryl Paschke performing on nyckelharpa for middle school students