

Elisabeth von Trapp: Sculpting Her Own Sounds of Music

By Robert E. Martin

For Elisabeth Von Trapp, granddaughter of the famed Maria Von Trapp, 'the sounds of music' have defined her life for as long as she can recall.

Her father, Werner Von Trapp, will turn 90 this December, and even though he quit touring with the famous Von Trapp Family singers when she was born, Elisabeth enjoys vivid memories of values instilled within her at a very early age regarding the importance of music in one's life.

"Recently I came upon a very small photo of me sitting in front of my father, surrounded by my four brothers, while my father was playing this beautiful classical Austrian guitar. You can tell from my face that I am studying what he's doing with his fingers, and one of the stylistic ways I do play guitar today is through finger-picking, so he was a major influence at a very early age," recalls Von Trapp.

Beginning piano lessons at age 8, by the age of 16 she was playing guitar and traveling throughout New England performing with her brothers and sisters in small settings. Since those early years, she has taken her music to small opera houses and major performance centers, including the Washington National Cathedral, The Kennedy Center, and the Great Hall of New York City's Grand Central Station.

On Saturday, December 17th and Sunday, December 18th, she will be certain to enthrall mid-Michigan audiences with a special holiday performance entitled *A Von Trapp Christmas*, which will be held at the Midland Center for the Arts. Tickets for the concerts are \$27 for adults, and \$10 for students.

"Music was always a daily thing in our family," continues Von Trapp regarding her youthful recollections. "I grew up in the '60s, and loved listening to *The Mamas & the Papas*, *Bob Dylan* and *Judy Collins*, while my brothers listened to *The Kinks* and *The Rolling Stones*. I even had a little portable record player that I could take out into the fields if I wanted."

"But whenever my mother or father came into the house, the Vivaldi, Mozart and Bach would start up, which was no problem for me, and a pleasure to listen to all the classical albums we had. From that experience, I memorized both Classical & current music very early on, and sometimes would prefer listening to orchestra pieces and the beautiful melodies within it. But basically, I developed an understanding at how old music grew into the new, how it changed, even the consciousness of our musical history. It is so rich and varied. The further back you go, the more you understand the pendulum to create something new."

In her teen years, Elisabeth was fortunate to savor each of the many varied musical instruments throughout her household. "My parents would have a dulcimer, a guitar, a piano, a violin, harps, and many baroque instruments just laying around the house, so even today I look for the right instrument to lift the moment or compliment a song."

Having immersed her interests in both popular & classical music, which idiom does Elisabeth derive the most satisfaction from?

"When you hear a new song, you have to get to know it. When you listen to something old that you are familiar with, you also have to listen and really allow it to sink in with fresh ears," she reflects. "I need to roll from one extreme to the next. For example, I've been working on *The Freedom Trilogy* for the Midland show, and in listening to it; I realize the beauty of that composition is the way all the different genres of music intertwine. Especially in the last 10 years that I've been recording music, I find that textures of sound are very invigorating for me, and an incredible source of comfort and vibrancy."

From her recording experiences, Elisabeth likens the act of recording as opposed to live performance, in terms of a sculptor.

"Recording is a different approach to music because it offers the chance to sculpt the song and make adjustments, like an artisan shaping music. When you perform live all that design has to be already complete and integrated, so you aren't thinking or worrying about it. The beauty of recording is having a chance to understand the design of a song, to bring forth the better part of that design once you take it to the stage."

Turning Reality Into Myth

With the famous movie musical *The Sound of Music* celebrating its 40th Anniversary this year, does Elisabeth have any specific memories back when the film chronicling her grandmother's early life, and escape from Austria during the advent of Nazi Germany, was released?

"I have very vivid memories of that whole experience. I was 10 years old and my sister returned to Vermont after living in Austria for 3 years. She met Julie Andrews on the movie set when my Grandmother was on one of her buying trips."

"By the way, my Grandmother was not at all like Julie Andrews," laughs Elisabeth. "In fact she may have been the total opposite. I finally met Julie Andrews at the recent Anniversary Celebration for the movie and thanked her for doing such a great job portraying the sweet part of my grandmother!"

"My father sang and performed for 20 years with the Von Trapp Family Singers, from 1936 to 1956. The day I was born my father was able to be there, as he was for the birth of all his children. "

"I remember when the movie first came I went to see it with my father and watching his total disbelief at how they wrote this story about him and didn't ask him anything about it," smiles Elisabeth."

"I also remember when the scene where his sister started dating Rolf in the movie, he commented, 'She never dated anyone, not named Rolf.' And when they were crossing those mountains my father recognized them and said the cast was heading over to Germany and not the other way around."

"But I did get to meet Mary Martin when she was doing the original play on Broadway," continues Elisabeth. "All of us children gathered around her for a

Life Magazine promotional article in November, 1959, and I remember meeting her and singing the music from the musical. She actually taught us *Do, Re, Mi, My Favorite Things*, and *The Little Goat Herd*, while we all sat around this Poplar tree in front of the Trapp Family Lodge."

"Seriously, though, my Grandmother was a very remarkable person. She was a spectacular hostess, very gracious, and loved serving Austrian pastry in the afternoon. I remember having fond experiences visiting her and running to her apartment to say hello and being greeted with incredible stories of her experiences, and her vivid descriptions of the people she met, or whatever she encountered. She told beautiful stories and was a great story teller, which shows in the books that she wrote."

Something this journalist is curious about that he cannot recall from either the movie or book is how the Von Trapps actually started performing in the United States?

"They sang over in Austria," explains Elisabeth," mostly Classical, Sacred and Folk music. Their specialty was liturgical music and their conductor was a very musical priest."

"They entered a contest in Strasbourg and won 2nd Prize and there were a lot of talent agents in the audience, which secured them a number of bookings in Europe and one in the United States. They came over for their first small concert tour in 1936 and returned two more times, hoping to stay in 1939, which they did."

"They had to stay at Ellis Island for a few days to prove they were legitimate performers, and kept going back to Europe, but the borders were closing and eventually realized they couldn't return to Austria. They knew their time was short and what they had to do. Luckily they had sponsors within the States and performing is how they made their living."

"In fact, as I work on my business and advancing my own musical career, my admiration for my Grandmother and her management skills is profound."

What the Future Bodes

In listening to the music of Elisabeth Von Trapp, one is awed by the genetic continuity of her angelic voice and obvious gifts inherited through her musical lineage, and also sympathetic to the formidable challenge presented by stepping out from the broad spotlight defining her heritage, and into that unique arena she is trying to carve for herself.

In the spring of 2001, Elisabeth scored a nearly unprecedented coup: winning permission from Robert Frost's famously reticent publisher, Henry Holt & Co., to sing parts of the poet's oeuvre. *Poetic License*, released in June 2004, incorporates the sounds of jazz, contemporary and classical influences in the musical settings of poems by Frost & Shakespeare, a Japanese haiku and interpretations of *Over the Rainbow/What a Wonderful World*, Sting's *Fragile*, and *A Whiter Shade of Pale*.

Such a potently powerful work, how did Elisabeth begin to approach it? "I had to go back to an experience I had as a child in the 6th grade returning

from Austria. I was very excited about going to school in Vermont, because my experience there was so enriching and creative, not so intense and competitive as in Austria."

"One afternoon we got to watch a film documentary on Robert Frost teaching and walking country lanes and reading poetry. I never heard of him, but liked where he was - the paths looked like my backyard where I would play."

"English was a new language for me and I remember we had to recite one poem every week, which was hard for me to memorize. So I started with Frost's work. My maternal Grandmother (not Maria) had a great ability to recite poetry and taught me to do it as often as possible, then right before sleeping and upon awakening, recite it again. From that approach, I was able to memorize long ballads, or any lyric, so I employ these lessons every day."

Performing 30 to 90 concerts per year, Elisabeth views her music as constantly evolving. "When you work with a craft an idea that is fresh evolves for me that helps me to understand how to use my voice as an instrument. I didn't expect that to happen."

"The way I approach songs has also evolved. I find myself taking genres from the 11th Century Mystics - like a chanting experience and bring that to present day rhythm & blues, which is an even greater challenge - how to incorporate different styles but still maintain integrity within the presentation, so I don't appear schizophrenic."

"But in the final analysis, the beauty is in how the voice presents itself - the thread of continuity is within my voice itself, which its up to me to unlock."