

The Scene

This week in local music: Elisabeth Von Trapp

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Elisabeth Von Trapp's life has been a musical one. This is only natural, considering that she is a member of the curtain-wearing, Nazi-evading clan immortalized on stage and in film by "The Sound of Music." Elisabeth's father, Werner Von Trapp, was portrayed as the stoic Kurt in the movie, and grew up to become a member of the Trapp Family Singers. Her grandfather is Captain Von Trapp, and her step-grandmother is the famous flibbertigibbet, Maria.

Growing up in Vermont, Werner would sing both Austrian and American folk songs to Elisabeth, her sister and four brothers. These early influences would help sculpt her own music later on, a blend of classical, folk, and pop. Elisabeth's lustrous, emotionally resonant singing and intricate guitar playing recalls anyone from Schubert to Joni Mitchell. And yes, she does "Edelweiss" too.

We chatted with the singer/guitarist about her new album, *Poetic Justice*, which gives musical life to the poems of Robert Frost, and what it's like growing up Trapp.

For *Poetic License*, you had to get permission from Frost's publisher, Henry Holt & Co., to use his poems before scoring and recording the music. How long has the process taken?

The idea stemmed from my album in 1997, *One Heart, One Mind*. With the first Robert Frost poem, "A Minor Bird," came the idea that it'd be nice to have an album and focus on a project. It was a beautiful experience, to work more artistically on a project. You collect ideas differently. It opened up a variety of ideas and connections.

We had gotten permission from Henry Holt for the one poem, then we had to go back and ask very specifically for just the five. Right about that time, I was performing 100 concerts a year. In that time period I started putting together new ideas for songs: "Stopping By The Woods On a Snowy Evening," "The Impulse," "The Road Not Taken," "Acquainted With the Night," and "Come In."

How did you go about selecting which poems to use? Were there ones in particular that lent themselves to music?

The people at Henry Holt had paperclipped ideas and suggestions. "Come In" was one they selected. It gave me a sense of dialogue with Henry Holt. In most cases they were shorter poems. These five tended to have the verses and the rhyming. I loved the content of each one of these. "The Impulse" is very dark and very sad. It looked like a ballad. So I thought, I will approach this with a very simple melody. I focused on what the words were saying. Looked at a line to see how the ebb and flow of my voice would work.

What was the writing process like?

Sometimes I would have the words in front of me, line by line or verse by verse. I write with my guitar, so I would start playing different things. From the chord structure a melody would open up. Each song had its unique approach. You had to be multi-faceted. Sometimes I would have to let it go, and see if it really caught my fancy later.

My musicians, Erich Kory, who plays the cello and Chas Eller, a pianist, each added their own ideas. We've been a trio for almost 10 years, and we have a very open dialogue.

Growing up, did your family sing the songs that are associated with the Von Trapps, like "Edelweiss"?

Well, first the Broadway play came out in 1959. As a child, I remember Mary Martin [who played Maria in the original Broadway cast] teaching us "Do Re Mi" at the Trapp Family Lodge in Stowe, Vermont. We all had a copy of the album. But the true experience I had was having my father sing to us every night. Really beautiful folk songs, like "The Arkansas Traveler," "The Blue-Tail Fly" and "Waltzing Mathilda."

What kind of music had the most impact on you growing up?

At the time, growing up in the '70s, it was a combination of the pop and folk and the contemporary. I tried to fuse all that with my classical upbringing. I try to have very elaborate arrangements. Erich helps with that. The important thing is taking a song and finding what the song needs, then coming up with unique arrangements that suit the mood of the song. I always try to broaden my musical instruments. I have quite a collection.

When did you decide you were going to follow in the family business?

As a teenager I made that decision. I always took time to develop my musical talents. I took on odd jobs and performed for private functions. One of my first paying gigs was a wedding. I studied voice and music in college, and got my master's in drama and theater education. I'm certified to teach.

Have you ever lived in Austria?

I have lived there several times in my life. I went there at the age of 10 and learned the language for a year, then went back as an 18 year-old and attended a vocational school for dress design.

Do the Von Trapps still perform together?

I have some nieces and a nephew who are performing their own shows now. In the past I have performed with my brothers. But I do sing with my family. A couple of weeks ago my aunt had her 90th birthday. Some wonderful friends came from Austria, and they sang some songs. I sang as well, Austrian songs with an American approach. We sang "The Fox" and it became very silly and very fun. When you integrate two backgrounds of music, it gives a great example of how music permeates the heart. It doesn't matter where you come from. It's a very unifying experience.

