

Wayward Sisters: Always on the Move

The winners of the EMA/Naxos Recording Competition have a musical affinity for each other that overcomes the fact that they live in such distant locations

WAYWARD SISTERS, the Baroque consort that won the 2011 Early Music America/Naxos Recording Competition, lists among its goals to that it would like to rehearse more. Easier said than done, because Anna Steinhoff lives in Chicago, Anne Timberlake lives in Richmond, Virginia, Beth Wenstrom lives in New York City, and John Lenti, the lone brother in the group, lives in Seattle. How scattered they are explains the group's name; how and why they stay together as a performing ensemble explains why they are prizewinners.

"Overall, the distance is a huge issue we have to overcome every time we play together, both in terms of cost and in terms of communication. It definitely wears," says Timberlake, who plays recorders in the group. Adds Wenstrom, who plays Baroque violin with Wayward Sisters, "We recognize that what we're trying to do is completely crazy, with us living in different places, but music always requires a little insanity." (The name, by the way, also refers to Henry Purcell's conjuring of Shakespeare's witches.)

The sisters in Wayward Sisters met when they were undergraduates in Oberlin, but only Timberlake played Baroque music. So while they became great friends, they never actually made music together. When they graduated in 2003, they went their separate ways musically, but remained friends. Eventually, Wenstrom and Steinhoff took paths that brought them to early music (Wenstrom was one of the first graduates of Juilliard's historical performance

program), and in 2009 they decided to meet in Chicago, play together, record a demo, and just see how it went.

Lenti, who plays theorbo and guitar, knew Timberlake and Steinhoff and was glad for an excuse to visit his brother in Chicago, so they called him in to play continuo. (He now refers to himself as an "honorary sister.") Says Timberlake, "We recorded a little bit, we had a great time, and we wondered how we could do more of this."

Only with meticulous planning. "This past summer we sat down and actually went through our calendar for the entire year and tried to find three or four or more times, if possible, that we could all get together," says Steinhoff, who plays Baroque cello with the group. "And it's hard to even find three times over the course of the year, with all our schedules. So every time we get together we make the most of it. We rehearse really intensely and perform three or four times."

Winning the recording competition will give them more chances to rehearse and play together, because they have found it easier to get on concert series and festival programs now that they have some recognition. But the centerpiece of their prize is a recording to be



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Clockwise from top, the Wayward Sisters: John Lenti, theorbo and guitar, Beth Wenstrom, violin, Anne Timberlake, recorders, and Anna Steinhoff, cello.

made by Naxos this coming July in Toronto. And given the group's logistical challenges, preparing for that has been planned with the precision of a military campaign.

The program, picked by Naxos, is music by English composer Matthew Locke (c.1621–1677). The CD will feature Locke's *Broken Consort*, Parts 1 and 2, and his three suites from *Tripla*



Concordia, a collection of English music by Locke and his contemporaries published in London in 1677. All agree that the program is both exciting and wonderfully weird. “There are a couple of suites we’re doing that are very dissonant, to the point where the first time we played through them, we weren’t sure if all the notes were correct. But once you get used to it, it’s really, really interesting,” says Steinhoff.

Wenstrom ended up creating the performing edition for Locke’s Suite in E Minor. “In the facsimile that we’d seen, it looks like someone took a Magic Marker and just blotted it out. You can tell that there’s a staff only at the beginning where the five lines start, and then it’s completely black,” Wenstrom explains. “Anne started calling libraries all over the U.S. trying to figure out if it’s just a bad scan or the facsimile is unreadable. And she finally found someone at a library in West Virginia who was able to scan it again in dark, medium, and light. It took many hours to look at the music, look away, look at the music again, look away, and determine what each of the notes was.”

They have not been able to find a recording of the suite and are excited at the possibility that theirs might be the first. “The *Tripla Concordia* set was written at the very, very end of Locke’s life, and you can hear that France has come to England,” says Wenstrom. “There’s a French overture; there are dotted rhythms at the beginning, and then it moves to a fast section. Clearly, he’s trying to do what’s cool.”

Wayward Sisters has performed some Locke before but had to prepare several pieces for the CD. “We figured out that we want to give as many concerts as we can of this music in the month leading up to the recording,” explains Lenti. The prize pays for recording and producing the CD, but not travel and lodging expenses in Toronto, the venue chosen by Naxos. So they held a fundraiser through the web site Kickstarter and exceeded their fundraising goal.

With that money, everyone met in Chicago in April to rehearse the CD program and give two concerts. Then comes a performance at the Washington Early Music Festival in June, a trip to the American Recorder Society festival in early July, a quick concert in Michigan, and then on to Toronto for three days to make the CD.

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“It’s going to be a fairly intense schedule, but I think it will produce a good recording because we will have had a chance to try out this music by playing for other musicians and by trying it out in front of audiences.” says Lenti. “Part of the security of having done the fundraising is that we’re not counting on any of the self-produced

concerts we’re doing to pay for themselves.”

Given the logistical challenges, though, one can’t help but ask, why have a group at all? Steinhoff says, “I think there is a really special quality and an energy you find when you’re playing with the musicians you’re supposed to be playing with; any one of us would travel any distance for that feeling. It helps that we have that natural music-making together, so even though we can’t rehearse a lot, things happen naturally with us.”

Wenstrom adds, “I remember someone telling me when I was an undergrad, ‘If something really works, do what you can to stick with it.’ I didn’t really pay attention to that comment, but then I realized what he meant because I feel that way with this group. If you really have the same idea about what you want musically or your sounds match really well or you can talk through your music without having to explain things to each other and you just play well together, you do anything you can to make it work. Because you just don’t find that every day.”

Beth Adelman has been writing for EMA magazine for more than a decade and is an educated and enthusiastic listener. If you have a project you think should be profiled here, contact her at considerthis@nyct.net.

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