

Violist's passion for early music

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Viola player Aaron Westman is one of the most popular period instrumentalists on the West Coast.

At the tender age of 3, Aaron Westman used to listen to his mother teach piano, then go over to the keyboard and play what he had heard.

By age 9, he had picked up one of his grandfather's violins. Then, at the urging of Santa Rosa High School music teacher Nick Xenelis, Westman reluctantly switched over to the viola at age 15.

"I hated it, and I didn't want to learn alto clef," the long-haired musician confessed, referring to the written sign used in music for lower-toned instruments. "But when I went back to playing violin, it started to give me a headache."

While studying at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, Westman crossed paths with well-known harpsichordist Laurette Goldberg and got bitten by the baroque bug. He had finally found his niche.

"Baroque music is a lot more like chamber music," the 32-year-old musician said. "It's more democratic, and the conductor is almost irrelevant."

(Baroque music was written from 1600 to 1750, following the Renaissance. It was a fruitful period during which Italian, French, German and English composers contributed to the development of opera and oratorio as well as many instrumental forms such as the fugue and concerto. Baroque orchestras and chamber ensembles are similar because they do not have conductors; the concertmaster normally serves as the group's leader during performance.)

After getting a master's degree in both viola and early music performance from Indiana University in Bloomington, Ind., Westman gravitated back to the Bay Area, where he is now in demand in the thriving early-music scene.

He performs as principal violist with Jeffrey Thomas' American Bach Soloists and as a member of Nicholas McGegan's Philharmonic Baroque, among other ensembles.

“I play in San Diego and Los Angeles, up and down the West Coast,” Westman said. “And 99 percent of the repertoire is baroque.”

Westman also teaches privately from his home in Petaluma, which he shares with his girlfriend, Shirley Hunt, who plays viola da gamba, the stringed bass instrument of the 17th century.

Last fall, Westman was chosen as a finalist for Music Director of the Young People's Chamber Orchestra, the Santa Rosa Symphony student ensemble formerly led by violist Linda Ghidossi-DeLuca.

“When I have time, I play with the Santa Rosa Symphony,” he said. “But baroque music is my passion.”

In Sonoma County, Westman has been a key player in promoting early music, creating the critical mass required for instrumental baroque music to get off the ground.

Westman's quartet, Agave Baroque, will perform “Cold Genius: The Music of Henry Purcell” at 8 p.m. Saturday at the Holy Family Episcopal Church in Rohnert Park as part of the Sonoma Bach season.

The program of works by Purcell, William Lawes and Matthew Locke was originally commissioned by the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, which liked the program so much they asked the ensemble to make it into a film.

Agave Baroque — including Hunt on viola da gamba, Kevin Cooper on baroque guitar, JungHae Kim on harpsichord and Westman on baroque violin — recorded the “Cold Genius” program last June at the Green Music Center on the SSU campus in Rohnert Park.

Sonoma Bach is a new, non-profit concert series led by former SSU Music Professor Robert Worth. The series is presented by two choral groups — the Sonoma Bach Choir, formerly part of SSU; and Circa 1600, a new chamber chorus focused on the 16th and 17th-century repertoire — as well as the newly formed Live Oak Baroque Orchestra.

“When we decided to leave SSU, we made a decision to expand our mission to include instrumental music,” Worth explained. “The idea is to build our own orchestra.”

Because of his background and contacts in the early music community, Westman was instrumental in the formation of the Live Oak Baroque Orchestra, which will be led by well-known baroque violinist Elizabeth Blumenstock.

“It was Aaron's idea to invite Elizabeth to join us,” Worth said. “She's only playing one concert this year, but she's willing to be our director. Anybody who knows Elizabeth and her playing gets very excited.”

Blumenstock will lead Sonoma Bach's upcoming concert set, “Friends and Angels,” on Feb. 4 and 5 in Rohnert Park and Kenwood. Those two concerts also feature local counter-tenor vocalist Christopher Fritzsche (formerly of Chanticleer) along with the Live Oak Baroque Orchestra.

Westman programmed and organized the “Friends and Angels” concerts, which includes J.S. Bach's beloved Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 along with lesser-known works by Johann Christoph Bach, Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber and Johann Heinrich Schmelzer.

“This repertoire comes from a generation before J.S. Bach, and that is some of my favorite music,” Westman said. “It's the 5- and 6-part German and Austrian music that Bach grew up on.”

Westman is particularly fond of the music of Johann Christoph Bach, J.S. Bach's first cousin once removed.

“It's got the spirituality of (J.S.) Bach, but it has more emotion,” he said. “The middle baroque music is really emotional. They were asking, ‘How can we experiment and push these instruments to their limit?’”

Throughout his training, Westman has pushed himself to learn from a wide range of teachers who taught him different aspects of being a musician. In high school, he studied with Roy Malan, concertmaster of the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra.

“He was very systematic, with a Franco-Belgian technique,” he said. “I ended up being a very tense player.”

But it was Alan De Veritch at Indiana University who taught Westman how to focus and relax while playing his large, 17-inch viola.

“Initially, I learned to play with high knuckles and a high arm,” he said. “Now I'm all about the floppy wrist and keeping the elbow low.”

And because he performs baroque music almost exclusively, shaping each note carefully on the soft-sounding, gut strings typical of the genre, rather than louder, more piercing steel strings — the violin no longer gives him headaches.

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