An Interview with Pippa Macmillan

Pippa Macmillan is a renowned specialist of historical bass instruments. The first undergraduate of the Royal Academy of Music to specialize in Baroque Double Bass, she has also completed a Masters in Historical Performance at The Juilliard School. Between 2015-2019 she was Professor of Baroque Double Bass at the Royal College of Music. She recently moved to Toronto to take up a position as a core member of Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra.

Pippa performs regularly with the English Concert, including at Carnegie Hall and Wigmore Hall. She has played at Glyndebourne Festival Opera and the BBC Proms with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, and she performs with Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique, English Baroque Soloists, Academy of Ancient Music, and Florilegium. She has recently appeared as guest principal with the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra and the Handel and Haydn Society, Boston. In 2015 she appeared in London's West End in the Globe Theatre's production of Farinelli and the King, and also in the play's Broadway transfer in 2017.

Pippa is a fully qualified Suzuki cello teacher, as well as a trained Suzuki double bass teacher, and thoroughly enjoys teaching and watching students develop. Her students are frequently members of the National Children's Orchestra of Great Britain and perform at venues including the Royal Albert Hall.

Heather Miller Lardin: How did you become interested in early music?

Pippa Macmillan: I wasn't really aware of the Historical Performance scene when I was growing up, and as a teenager my main love was playing in a symphony orchestra – mostly large-scale Romantic works. When I started my bachelor's degree at the Royal Academy of Music in London (RAM), they offered Baroque bass lessons alongside everything else, and it seemed like a no-brainer to sign up for extra free lessons! My lessons with the ever-inspiring Chi-chi Nwanoku were eye-opening, and within months I was being led in student ensembles by musicians such as [Baroque violinist] Rachel Podger. Once I started playing on gut strings, I didn't really want to go back, and I changed my degree path from "modern double bass" to “Baroque double bass” halfway through the course. By then, I was taking part in the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment's Experience Scheme (OAE), and also the RAM's new monthly Bach Cantata cycle (I went on to perform in approximately 36 of these hour-long concerts). I was turning up to watch OAE rehearsals and concerts as often as I could, and getting to know other students and professional musicians within the early music “scene.”

HML: Congratulations on your successful audition for Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra! How long have you been in Toronto? Are you settling in well? How has the first half of your first season been?

PM: Thank you! I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to move here. I was offered the job in September 2018, with a September 2019 start date, so I had plenty of time to prepare to move from London to Toronto. The orchestra has been incredibly welcoming and they have done everything they can to make the transition smooth. Although it’s a long distance to move, culturally it’s been very easy to slot in here. My daughter, who is 4, started school a few days after we moved, and we have a great community of neighbors that we've met through the school. This winter we've been sledding, skiing and ice skating, so we're making the most of the winter sport opportunities! The first
half of the season with Tafelmusik has been wonderfully diverse – Viennese 17th-Century music on violone, Bach motets with the choir, Mozart’s Don Giovanni with Opera Atelier, a collaboration with Vesuvius Ensemble playing southern Italian Christmas music, a tour to Europe with Karina Gauvin (soprano), Handel’s Messiah, Tchaikovsky and Mendelssohn string music, a program with wind octet playing Mozart and Rossini, and teaching at the Tafelmusik Winter Institute, where the students prepared a program based around the birth of the symphony.

HML: Why did you decide to audition for Tafelmusik?

PM: There are so few auditions worldwide for historical double bass players, and even fewer for a group that can offer a salary. There didn’t seem to be much to lose by submitting an audition tape, then I hesitated a bit before booking flights once I was offered a live audition, as that was a bigger commitment! I was interested to experience the audition and meet the other bass players who were also auditioning. At this point, it was 4 years since I had graduated from Juilliard, and I was enjoying an exciting and varied freelance lifestyle in London, but I was open to the idea of moving elsewhere.

HML: What was the audition process like? Have you taken other auditions for period instrument orchestras?

PM: This was my third audition for a period instrument orchestra, and the most formal. I submitted a tape with my application, consisting of specified orchestral excerpts – Bach, Handel, Rameau, Mozart, Beethoven, and a solo piece. The live auditions were spread over three days, and the repertoire to prepare was the same as for the tape. The first round was behind a screen, and I played most of what was on the list. The second round, later that day, wasn’t behind a screen, and this time they would hear me play,
then ask me to make some adjustments to the shaping, articulation, tempi and so on. The final round was two days later, and members of the orchestra formed a small ensemble for me to play with. We played some of the orchestral excerpts again as a group, and we would play sections several times so they could see how adaptable (or not!) I was. Later that day I received a phone call from the music director Elisa Citterio offering me the job! Now I have a two-year probation, before hopefully being offered tenure.

HML: Tafelmusik is generally led by the concertmaster rather than the conductor, in the 18th-century manner. What’s that like from the bass section?

PM: I believe it gives everyone a renewed commitment to the music. We all have to take more responsibility, as we can’t rely on any one person in the same way as you might with a conductor at the front. We listen differently and more intently, and instead of our eyes mostly being trained towards someone on a podium, our eyes are free to look around the ensemble and connect with different people. We all breathe together, and feel the music as one organism. Of course, the bass section (including cello, bassoon and keyboard) functions as one unit for most of the music that I play, so we connect closely with each other, following the principal cello, but agreeing among ourselves without generally too much verbal discussion(!).

HML: What is the early music scene in England like compared to the U.S.? We’d love to hear about some of the ensembles you played with there.

PM: It’s quite different. Most ensembles are based in London, and musicians typically live within about 2 hours of London and play with a variety of ensembles – plus some musicians come from continental Europe. Although each group has its own identity, there is a lot of cross-over of musicians! There’s always an exciting variety to what’s happening – perhaps a short tour to Europe, or a concert in Wigmore Hall, or a large-scale Romantic work at the BBC Proms. The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment is especially adaptable, performing a Baroque program one week, then a Bruckner symphony the next week. Short tours to Europe are always fun (apart from the early starts).

HML: How did attending the Juilliard Historical Performance (HP) program affect your career?
PM: It was certainly a beneficial move, to abandon my fledgling career in London a year after finishing my bachelor’s, and leave for two more years of study. Ironically, it brought me into contact with a number of high-profile British HP musicians who would be brought over by Juilliard for masterclasses and orchestral projects! I maintained my links with the United Kingdom by returning periodically to complete my apprenticeship with the English Baroque Soloists and Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique. It’s difficult to know how things could have worked out differently if I hadn’t gone to Juilliard, but I’m so glad to have a network of friends and colleagues all over the world, and to have had my horizons broadened. If I hadn’t spent two years living in New York, I don’t know if I would have been so open to potentially moving to Toronto, and I might not be here now.

HML: Tell us about your instruments please!

PM: I was lucky enough to be able to purchase my dream instrument in 2012, a Cremonese double bass thought to have been made around 1750. It’s been cut down from a larger instrument, but it’s got real depth, warmth and volume. It’s a stay-at-home instrument for me though – I’ve only flown once with it, to get it to Toronto. When I moved to New York, I travelled by boat! My second bass dates from a similar time, probably made in Prague, possibly by Johann Eberle though it isn’t labelled. Apparently it was found in a barn in Eastern Europe! I also have two other basses, and four small-size basses, but I won’t go into that here… My favorite bow is an original “Dragonetti” bow, which is incredibly powerful and fun to play! I have another original
my Baroque bow was made by Roger Doe, and I also have a “Sperger” bow by David Herman.

HML: Do you play violone or viola da gamba?

PM: Both. I had lessons on viola da gamba with Sarah Cunningham while I was at Juilliard, and I thoroughly enjoyed playing in a viol consort! This made it pretty easy to pick up the G-violone, and I performed Bach’s second gamba sonata on violone for my Masters recital (transposed down a fifth).

HML: Is there any one performance that you’d consider the highlight of your career thus far?

PM: Without a doubt, a live-streamed performance of Handel’s Ariodante with English Concert and [soprano] Joyce DiDonato in the title role, at Carnegie Hall in 2017. It was the third of eight performances we gave, half in the US and half in Europe, and there was a huge sense of excitement firstly to be performing in Carnegie Hall, and secondly to know that we were performing to an audience worldwide. English Concert is one of my favorite groups to play with, and to have a star-studded cast as well made the whole experience supremely fun!

HML: What are some pieces you haven’t played yet, but would love to?

PM: I’ve been lucky enough to cover a fair amount of orchestral repertoire in the last two decades. It would be fun to play Shostakovich’s Tenth Symphony and Strauss’s Alpine Symphony again – a lot of works I’ve played only once but would love to tackle again. I’d love to play cello in Tchaikovsky’s string sextet Souvenir De Florence because that’s an all-time favorite of mine! And any brass instrument in Janácek’s Sinfonietta because I’m eternally sad that I can’t play that piece. Next season with Tafelmusik I’ll play Beethoven’s Triple Concerto, another favorite of mine, which I’ve never played, so I’m hugely looking forward to that!