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SINGING SAWS

Mark Hedin

Sunday, August 7, 2005



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Nobody's quite sure when man first realized that the saw, beyond being useful for cutting wood, had a hidden capacity to entertain. But over the past couple of hundred years at least -- since "sprung" steel was forged, allowing blades to bend back and forth -- saws and the people who play them have shared many a stage.

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The instrument's heyday probably came in the '20s and '30s; it faded from view with the decline of vaudeville. Marlene Dietrich may be the most famous saw player, though, like many musicians before and since, she was unable to support herself purely on her musical talent and had to find other lines of employment.

Many of the world's best contemporary saw players -- they're called sawyers, really -- will convene next weekend at Roaring Camp in Felton (Santa Cruz County) for the Saw Players Picnic & Music Festival, the 27th such event.

The Bay Area will be well represented, and in some ways our region is on the cutting edge of a saw music revival (punning seems to be endemic with this instrument).

Elder statesman Charlie Blacklock will be there, along with a son and grandson. Besides playing in a family band for many years, Blacklock, an Alamedan by way of a Hollister-area ranch, has designed and sold saws made specifically for playing music since the '60s.

Among the local performers, Jackie Jones, Bill Heier and Luciano Chessa are three to watch. Jones favors swinging renditions of popular songs from the '20s and '30s. She took up the saw upon retiring from the Postal Service, long after having seen it played during her childhood. She says she sought an instrument with variable pitch that she could use to accompany homemade multitrack recordings, which might be prone to variations in pitch. "I don't have to wait for fickle musicians," says Jones, happy to be a solo act.

Chessa takes a "new saw school" approach, featuring a neoclassical repertoire with pieces by Stravinsky and other composers.

Heier is alone among saw musicians in that he plays a 6-foot-long crosscut saw that typically requires a lumberjack at each end if it's going to be used to cut wood. Heier, who uses a mallet rather than the more typical method of bowing the blade, refers to his instrument of choice as "jagged and very dangerous. I'm apparently the only one in captivity who plays that thing."

Saws made purely for music typically do not have their teeth "set or sharpened," meaning the tiny triangular teeth are merely part of the flat steel blade and not bent out at angles to better slice through wood.

The thickness of the blade -- measured in thousandths of an inch -- will affect both how

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long a note can be sustained (the thicker the steel, the longer the sustain) and also how difficult the particular saw is to play, as the blade must be bent into an S shape to produce a note when bowed.

New York busker Natalia Paruz has identified 17 models of saws specifically made for playing music, fabricated in France (La Lame Sonore -- the singing blade), Germany (Feldmann), Sweden's Sandvik Stradivarius, two models from China as well as Blacklock's San Jose-forged designs and the gold-plated Mussehl & Westphals from Wisconsin.

Most saws have about a two-octave range. David Weiss, perhaps the world's premier sawyer, describes their sound as having an "eerie quality, with a lot of vibrato, between a female voice and someone whistling" and compared it to that of a theremin.

Weiss credits his sawmanship for "opening up a lot of doors" in his career. A professor at the University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music, Weiss recently retired from the Los Angeles Philharmonic after 30 years as principal oboist, but it was his saw playing that gained him entry to Carnegie and Avery Fisher halls in New York and two appearances on "The Tonight Show" in the Johnny Carson era. His "Virtuoso Saw" CD, which has sold 10,000 copies, includes Beatles songs, the intermezzo from "Carmen" and Gershwin's "Summertime."

Given the saw's relative lack of visibility in recent decades, the sawyer community tends to skew into the senior demographic. However, it also appears to be catching on lately among younger musicians -- Blacklock reports selling several instruments to Texas' Asylum Street Spankers, for example, and Weiss has found work playing his saw on soundtracks for "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" and "Robots."

"I could have played the oboe 1,000 years," Weiss says, adding that a more traditional instrument wouldn't have earned him the acclaim he's won with the saw. "It used to be in years past just a novelty. But now that's not enough."

Saw Players Picnic & Music Festival: Potluck dinner and jam, 6-10 p.m. Sat.; concert and competition, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. next Sun. Free. Roaring Camp & Big Trees, Felton. Information: (415) 459-7722. Directions: (831) 335-4484, www.roaringcamp.com, www.sawplayers.org.

E-mail Mark Hedin at mhedin@sfgchronicle.com.

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