

Baroque

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As a student, baroque period music came most naturally. One of her favorite musical structures is the fugue, which starts with one idea that is permuted into different combinations. The subsequent passion and rationality draws Arsenault in. She describes the feeling as going on an odyssey through sound before coming back home again.

Baroque violin became Arsenault's unique focus as a performer and instructor. The baroque era stretches from 1600-1760 and features composers such as J. S. Bach, Antonio Vivaldi and George Handel. Arsenault explains how the baroque violin relies more on resonance rather than power. It's the expressiveness of the instrument that has endeared it to her.

"I enjoy playing other music, but it feels more like taking on a role," says Arsenault. "With baroque music it's not taking on a role, it's just showing who I am."

The Tallahassee Bach Parley started in 1981 as a choral group. When Arsenault moved to Tallahassee in 1998, she worked as an instrumentalist that was brought in for their performances. In 2005, she was asked to put on a concert, but shortly thereafter the group went dormant. In June 2008, Arsenault put together a revival concert and has been leading the group ever since.

Four years ago she was able to incor-



Bach Parley Spring Concert and Annual Reception will be at 3 p.m. Sunday, June 2. NICK BALDWIN

porate another part of her identity with the Bach Parley String Academy. As a music teacher, the academy reaches young children to older adults of all skill levels housed within St. John's Episcopal Church. Students can learn viola, violin and cello lessons from faculty, and a scholarship program makes it accessible for all.

"My teaching approach is non-judgmental," says Arsenault. "Mistakes are just information and they are not to be

judged. A note is either too high or too low or just right. You don't need to tie yourself into knots over it."

Arsenault tailors her curriculum to each individual student, matching their temperaments and learning styles. She believes music is an avocation or gift that can be practiced by people professionally or recreationally. This inclusive approach extends to the Bach Parley, which is comprised of community members who meet and rehearse for concerts

over the year.

"Parley" translates to conversation, which is ever-present in these events. The June concert is the Parley's season finale with a reception to follow for audiences and musicians to speak with one another. Arsenault extends these interactions into the performance itself, giving background and inside information about each music piece in between playing.

"If the audience doesn't know why we love this music, then they are not going to feel connected," says Arsenault. "If I can tell them something about the composer's life, it breaks down barriers between performers and audience."

Sometimes rather than speaking about historical facts, she will give insight into why the musicians like to play certain sections, or a behind the scenes chat about what happens in rehearsal. She notes that while the suggested donation is \$10, the performance is free to the public so that anyone can come and listen. Working from the baroque sheet music as a rough blueprint, Arsenault feels the experiences that the musicians and audience bring to the performance is key.

"Surrender is the greatest challenge," says Arsenault. "Every music performance is brand new and every moment of it is brand new. Music has to be in the present moment."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).



Valeria Arsenault, who performs with Bach Parley, says: "The music just soaks into you and starts to change you." BOB HOWARD

Brand new baroque

For violinist, playing Bach's music 'starts to change you'

Amanda Sieradzki Council on Culture & Arts

Dr. Valerie Arsenault's violin speaks. Over time, the president and music director of the Tallahassee Bach Parley has become inseparable from her instrument. She draws parallels between the "voices" of an orchestra string section and a choir — if the cello is a booming bass, then the violin is the twinkling soprano.

Arsenault enjoys how an instrument can say so much without words. The baroque music the Parley performs communicates a wide breadth of emotion and feeling. Their spring concert draws in nearly 300 attendees every year.

For Arsenault, the upcoming June 2 performance at St. John's Episcopal Church is another chance to open channels of understanding and empathy.

"I don't have to worry about saying anything controversial (with my violin)," explains Arsenault. "There's so much conflict and distress in the world right now, that more than ever, it's all about being able to bring people together."

One highlight from the program is J. S. Bach's Cantata No. 4, "Christ lag in Todesbanden." Though the lyrics are sung in German, Arsenault appreciates how

If you go

What: Tallahassee Bach Parley Spring Concert and Annual Reception

When: 3 p.m.
Sunday, June 2

Where: St. John's Episcopal Church, 211 North Monroe St.

Cost: \$10 suggested donation, free childcare available

Contact: For more information, call 850-459-3195 or visit www.bachparley.org.

the piece's instrumentation can connect anyone to the music regardless of language or experience. It's her mission as music director to facilitate a program that rises above differences and connects with audiences.

Arsenault attended the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston and earned her master's degree in baroque violin from Indiana University and doctorate from Florida State University. She drew pictures of violins as a young child, and her studies deepened as a teenager when she first heard Bach's sonatas and partitas for solo violin.

"The music just soaks into you and starts to change you," says Arsenault. "It becomes a part of you."

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