Insinuating and Nuanced

Canadian Bassoonist Visits Ithaca College

By Bill Chaisson

When we called Nadina Mackie Jackson was in the middle of buying electronic equipment online for her bassoon. Actually, it was an octave harmonizer, usually used with a guitar. It shifts the pitch of the expressed sound and combines it with the original to create harmonies.

"It's more for playing with folk or pop musicians," said Mackie Jackson, "where everyone's amped. Because, you know, the bigger the instrument, the quieter the sound. The higher registers just carry further." Bassoons, you see, are big. They stand 4 feet, 5 inches, but they folded, so their actually sounding length is 8 feet, 4 inches.

Mackie Jackson give a performance in the Hockett Family Recital Hall at Ithaca College on Tuesday, Oct. 1 at 7 p.m. and then will appear again as a guest of the IC Symphony Orchestra on Saturday, Oct. 5 at 8:15 p.m.

Mackie Jackson met fellow bassoonist Lee Goodhew Romm in 2006 at a Double Reed Conference at IC. "People apply to host it," said Mackie Jackson. "It's quite a big deal to get one." The collegial friendship that developed led to her impending visit, during which she will also conduct a masterclass, which is also open to the public.

Mackie Jackson was born and raised in northern British Columbia, the daughter of author, teacher, rancher, and log-home builder B. Allan Mackie. She saw her first bassoon in touring band of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. "I didn't have lessons until I got to university," she said. "I was self-taught until then."

She attended the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, which accepts only enough students to populate an orchestra. Consequently they only take one bassoonist at a time. "I found there to be a real drive and directness in the American students," said the Canadian. "It made for an invigorating change."

The bassoon is a double reed instrument like the oboe, but the reeds, like the instrument, are much larger. The back reed is rounded and the front is flat, and because the proper shape is so complex, all bassoonists carve their own reeds from cane (*Arundo donax*).

"The quality of the reed influences the sound," said Mackie Jackson. "The sound of a bassoon includes a lot of harmonics and it has a lot of presence. It can be very … insinuating."

At her Oct. 1 recital Mackie Jackson will be accompanied by Goodhew Romm and Jean Radice (harpsichord), and members of the bassoon studio. The program will include Berio's *Sequenza XII*; Vivaldi's Concerto in Eflat RV483; Marc Mellits's Black for Two Bassoons; and Dan Kellog's Canticle for the Earth for 14 Bassoons.

Nadina Mackie Jackson (Photo provided)

The last composition "sounds like an organ," according to Mackie Jackson. Italian composer Luciano Berio's work is known for its experimental nature and "the sequence of 12" requires circular breathing to play.

"It definitely involves going to a dream place," said the Canadian bassoonist, "where you hear every sound that you don't usually hear."

The masterclass is a tradition in the academic community that isn't much attended by outsiders. "They can be anywhere from boring to really interesting," said Mackie Jackson. "It is basically public teaching. You are finding specific points to help a particular player [the selected pupil] and general points to help everyone [the onlookers, usually other students]. There will be people just listening and other people taking notes while the student is playing. Usually everyone sits there in reverent silence while the master speaks, but," she laughed, "that's not me."

Mackie Jackson cultivates a deliberately unconventional image for a classical player, keeping her hair dyed a bright blue and being willing to experiment with electronic sound.

"It changes the sound and reduces the complexity," she said, "and it is less beautiful." But because she is willing to amplify and alter the sound of her instrument, she gets the opportunity to work with a wide range of musicians and composers. "Right now I'm working with a composer who wants to use wah wah," she said and rang off to complete the purchase of her octave harmonizer. •