

Shira Kammen Has a

The Bay Area early strings specialist talks with Elizabeth Dobbs about her repertoire, her instruments, and the rich mix of experiences that make for a fascinating life in music.

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Thing for Strings

I'd been hearing about Shira Kammen for many years as one of the best vielle players and all around musicians anywhere. She sings in a voice infused with complex, dark colorings of sound, and when she plays the vielle, the music that emerges has power, clarity, and life.

Shira Kammen was born in 1961 and grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is the daughter of a professional violinist, and a singer who is also a scientist. After receiving her music degree from UC Berkeley, Shira studied vielle with Margriet Tindemans, a specialist in early music who has been Shira's greatest musical influence.

Over the years, Shira has been a member of Ensembles Alcatraz, Project Ars Nova, Fortune's Wheel, and Medieval Strings. She has performed with Sequentia, Hesperion XX, the Boston Camerata, The King's Noyse, and with Medieval singers John Fleagle and Anne Azema. Among her television and film credits are the documentaries A World Inscribed, about illuminated manuscripts, and Radiant Life, about the life of the mystic abbess Hildegard von Bingen, and she played the Medieval fiddle in the soundtrack for the motion picture O, a version of Othello. Recently she founded Class V Music, an ensemble that performs on river rafting trips.

Shira's tiny Bay Area cottage is stuffed with music, instruments, music stands, and photos. During my visit, she played an experimental instrument commissioned from builder Jim Wimmer, which she calls a "violin d'amore." Beneath the standard four strings of the violin is another set of strings. As Shira drew her bow across violin d'amore's playing strings, these sympathetic strings took up the sound and sang the notes back as an after-shading. Mozart described the sound of the viola d'amore as sweet, and the experimental violin's voice has that sweetness colored with a sad, lovelorn inflection.

Shira put the violin d'amore aside and took a vielle from its case. Rather than tucking the instrument under her chin, she rests it lower, just below the collarbone.

Liz: Why do you hold your vielle low on your chest?

Shira: There are different ways to hold the vielle. The position will depend on the size and shape of the instrument and the background of the performer. Margriet Tindemans usually holds hers between the knees, gamba-style, but she will also turn it and play it violin-style as well. I play the vielle most often in a very relaxed violin style. It is easier to hear my own sound with the instrument a bit farther from my ear. Surface noise that is inaudible to the audience – the sound of the hair on the strings or fingers moving on the fingerboard – can distract a musician.



(David Douglass, violinist and director of the The King's Noyse, has been researching this topic since 1975. When I consulted him about how members of the string family were held, he said, "One of the hallmarks of playing early bowed-string instruments is that there were no schools of technique. One simply did what worked best, and for many reasons that often involved relatively low placements of the instrument against the body. Shira is a free thinker and a brilliant one. She plays the way she does simply because it works, and that is the most solid common ground with early music that we have.")

Liz: What is your earliest music memory?

Shira: Probably listening to chamber music on the record player with my folks. My mom is a professional violinist

and my dad sang in choruses, so there was music around all the time. I remember the Schumann piano quintet made a big impression on me. It was so heartfelt, dramatic, happy, and sad, all at once.

Liz: What made you choose music as a career?

Shira: I think of music as one of the elements or one of the senses. I don't think I ever really chose music, that is, I didn't set out to make something happen. I was just doing what I enjoyed and was lucky enough to get work doing it. As I like to say, it sure beats working for a living!

Liz: When you first felt the desire to play music, what instrument did you select and why? How did you make your way to the vielle?

Shira: Sometimes I think of myself as a professional dilettante. I like so many things. I first played piano, then cello, violin, viola, viola da gamba, and finally found the vielle. My musical preferences kept getting earlier and earlier. I still like playing lots of different instruments and singing. Some musicians really fall in love with an instrument and want to live in the sound of it, but I am more the kind of musician who loves a type of music and will shamelessly bang away on whatever will get me to that kind of music.

Liz: What kinds of music projects excite you the most?

Shira: I love doing music for theater or in collaboration with other kinds of arts. Medieval storytelling and music is a great combination. I'd love to do a series of recordings in national parks. Doing straight concerts is fine, but I feel really excited by projects that dissolve the lines between performer and audience.

Liz: You specialize in early music and folk/ethnic music. What do you like about these forms?

Shira: There is something very direct and powerful about them. Of course,

Shira Kammen Has a Thing for Strings

those terms cover a lot – many hundreds of years of music and styles as varied as North Indian ragas and Irish step-dancing music. The musical language of the Medieval style is something I find very poignant. It is a play of consonance and dissonance, always a tension and a resolution. All music is that to some extent, but with Medieval and other modal music, it happens in a remarkably clear, almost physical way.

I think of Medieval music as extremely local. I imagine a world where, in order to communicate with the closest

ensemble, you couldn't phone, fax, or e-mail. You would tailor-make the music for what you have at hand. It is not prescribed music, like classical music. The page in classical music tells you all the measurements for the recipe – get louder here, softer here, play this line on such-and-such an instrument, etc. Medieval music is so much more like cooking without a recipe. It'll be tastier if you use what you happen to have with skill and wit.

Liz: Is Medieval music your favorite music to play and why?

Shira: I do love playing Medieval music, almost all kinds of Medieval music, but I also love singing early Renaissance music in a small ensemble. I love playing Breton folk music for dancers and playing Celtic tunes and singing ballads. Oh, and playing Eastern European tunes in weird meters.

Liz: What is the most challenging and difficult type of music for you to play, and why? How do you overcome some of the difficulties?

Shira: The music I am most technically removed from would be something like the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto. That would take a lot of re-focusing and exercise! But playing a contra-dance tune twenty times really fast is difficult in a very different way. It requires a different kind of stamina, a complete commitment to rhythm, and a very relaxed, un-stressed technique. Playing an esoteric troubadour song, starting with no musical notes at all, with a poem that is heady and contextually hard to understand, poses great difficulty because it requires making decisions and composing a part.

I think playing jazz would be very challenging. Overcoming the difficulties – I'm not sure if one ever does – but the more you immerse yourself in a style, the more of it you will understand. It is like any language: you can get as far as asking where the central bus station is or you can make beautiful poetry. It depends on your relationship and affinity for the language, your enthusiasm for the culture, and how cheeky you are. You can make poetry with only a few basic words if you dare...

Liz: I love the sound you get from your *vielle* and fiddle. It's very strong, clear, and powerful. How did you go about developing your sound?

Shira: Thanks for saying that! I want my sound to be like a voice, with all the nuances and colors of language. It is an ongoing process, trying to discover one's musical voice. If you can imagine the sound you want, the sound you desire to hear, you have more of a chance of making it. I've never been particularly disciplined at practicing. I love to play, and I think the more one listens to other musicians and other sounds, the



sounds of water or birds or car horns, for example, the more of a palette you have in your imagination.

Liz: The bow you use with your vielle is much more curved than a standard violin bow. It looks like a small archery bow strung with horsehair. Does your bow help you get the sound you hear in your head?

Shira: Yes, definitely! I like a bow that has direction in its shape and feel, a bow that has character. The very curved bow I have, made by English bowmaker Bernard Ellis, has a dance-like feel in the wood. I don't do well with weighty bows, and when I play with a modern bow I always hold it up on the stick, above the frog, like many traditional fiddlers. I'd never be allowed into a symphony orchestra any longer.

Liz: You have a lovely singing voice, too. Have you spent much effort developing it?

Shira: Thanks again! I think one of the hardest tests of self-acceptance is being able to really hear one's own voice. I haven't achieved that ability yet. It is such a joy to sing and to play with poetry and languages. I've taken lessons at times, and that is really useful if you find a good teacher. Listening to different kinds of singers and hearing what they do is a great way to learn, as is letting yourself pretend, say, that you are an opera singer, or an English ballad singer, or a musical comedy singer. It can be revealing as well as humorous. Trying on different personas makes your voice sound different.

Liz: Tell me what a typical month of playing/performing is like for you.

Shira: Well, I am probably the world's worst businessperson. There are so many things one is expected to do that musicians are completely untrained to do, for example, things an agent would do, like negotiating a fee, or scheduling, being a travel agent, and writing blurbs and little articles.

I am lucky to have a lot of different interests musically, so my musical life is quite varied. A month might include a tour or two, maybe somewhere exotic or maybe somewhere everyday, with concerts and maybe kids' shows or workshops, or some kind of recording, while the time at home would have all

Shira's Vielle

The vielle is a stringed instrument that looks something like a boxy violin. While the term vielle has been applied to a number of different instruments in Western musical history (including the hurdy-gurdy in France), it is most commonly associated with a four or five-string, slightly "waisted" Medieval fiddle, in which the lowest string sometimes acts as a drone. The instrument was praised at the end of the 13th century by Johannes de Grocheo as combining "in inteself the attributes of all other instruments."

Karl Dennis of Warren, Rhode Island, made a vielle for Shira in 1993. Says Dennis, "From a maker's point of view, Shira is just the sort of artist you want playing on your instrument. She produces such a beautiful sound and pays such attention to dynamics that it really



brings out the best in whatever she plays. When we first spoke about making an instrument for her, she was looking for greater

projection and had heard an instrument I had made for Robert Mealy. The aim was to have good projection along with the reedy warmth that makes the vielle voice distinctive. I'm very happy to see that this vielle has been serving her for the past few years."

The bow Shira uses to play the vielle, made by English bowmaker Bernard Ellis, is much more curved than a

standard violin bow, resembling a small archery bow strung with horsehair. The swath of horsehair is narrower than on a violin bow and its tension is not adjustable.

sorts of activities, from leading a singing class in rounds to teaching private lessons, to playing parties, or concerts, recording, perhaps playing in a play or some kind of theatrical setting. It really changes from month to month. Recently, I've been interested in producing my own CDs with lots of other mu-

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sicians. That is a great challenge, and very absorbing. Of course, the problem is raising the capital in order to do it at all.

Liz: You travel quite a bit. Now that airport security is so tight, do you have any interesting travel/musical instrument anecdotes?

Shira: Oh, yowza. Well, it is stressful, and I don't carry as many instruments with me as I used to. I occasionally

travel with a little Medieval harp, which my friend and colleague, John Fleagle made. After he made it, he realized it didn't fit in an overhead bin, so he had to cut down one of the curves on the harp to make it fit. I've encountered airline personnel who become angry and won't let you on with the instrument – in which case I usually cry, and not even on purpose. I've also encountered airline personnel who are kind and helpful and find a closet for my instruments.

Liz: You recently auditioned for Cirque du Soleil. What was that like?

Shira: I played the vielle and harp and sang, and I improvised on the violin to tracks from their shows. Then it got really scary because they had me doing theater games and movement. All my parody interpretive dances came back to me in an instant (Shira has been the life of quite a few parties by performing hilarious parodies of such dances). It was hard not to be self-conscious. I had to put all of that out of my mind and become the exuberant seven-year-old, transported by music, I'd been as a child. I'm not sure I pulled it off com-

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pletely, but I felt stretched and challenged in a really good way.

Liz: Tell me about Class V, the music group you founded to play on river rafting trips and named for the degree of danger and difficulty of a white water rapid.

Shira: Oh, it is so much fun! As many as four times a summer, I organize musicians for 4-5 day river trips on the Rogue River in Southern Oregon. Usually there are two violins and cello, sometimes violin, flute or recorder, and cello. The rafting company (James Henry River Journeys) had a special rubber waterproof cello-bag made for the occasions. Those river days are so blissful, with music and good wine and fine company, outrageous characters on a sparkling river running through lush green canyons where we see otters and eagles and herons. It's pretty great.

Liz: You produced *Music of Waters*, a CD recorded in the Grand Canyon.

What is involved in producing your own CD?

Shira: I have since produced a couple of CDs in the more predictable environment of a recording studio as opposed to the very unpredictable canyon. I really enjoy the process of conceiving of a program, of some mood or idea

I had a bad dream the other night, in which thousands of copies of a CD I'd made contained false starts and people swearing.

that binds the project together. It's very absorbing, like a musical playground in a way. I also like the acceptance it requires, acceptance that where you are that day musically is where you are. Also I enjoy playing and recording music that isn't meant to be frozen, music that by

its nature changes each time you play it. Producing a CD in an uncontrollable environment like the Grand Canyon was a great adventure. It held all sorts of obstacles and challenges, like the wind and weather and blowing sand, and trying to find just the right acoustics, hoping that my colleagues and I wouldn't fall off any cliffs while climbing down those dry washes with Medieval and other instruments. It was a blast!

Liz: What approach do you take when you edit your CDs?

Shira: I like to go for some kind of balance. I am not as likely to go for perfection. I want more of a snapshot of a good and soulful performance. Obviously, one doesn't want big mistakes or cursing (I had a bad dream about that the other night, in which thousands of copies of a CD I'd made contained false starts and people swearing). Most important is the spark and spirit in a performance, the coherency, and of course, having pitch and rhythm solid and good.

Liz: You've performed all over the world. What is your favorite place to perform?

Shira: I've loved playing in Romanesque Churches and Gothic Cathedrals in Europe, in the stairwell of Kroeber Hall at UC Berkeley, above Granite Rapid on the Colorado River, in the bridge of a ferry at night between Juneau and Haines in Alaska, under some really big boulders up a side creek on the Rogue River, and in the High Sierras and the High Desert. The strangest place I've played is in the elephant enclosure of the Jerusalem zoo.

Liz: What is your ultimate goal as a musician?

Shira: I don't know if that is clear to me yet. Of course, it would be very good to feel that my music contributes to the good of the world. I would like to be able to inspire a binding together of community. I'd love to inspire some kind of environmental feeling. Music is a language. I guess I'd like to explore that. Also I want to have a really good time and promote bliss and joy and feeling and all that. I'd like to have more confidence about it all. ♪

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