

Asheville Flutist Kate Steinbeck's children inspire her song

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by

Carol Motsinger

Time is love. It has to be for flutist Kate Steinbeck, because she regards time as our most precious limited resource.

"When I'm up on stage performing," she said, "it is me giving the audience my time. And giving you my time is giving you my love."

But Steinbeck's respect of time's true meaning doesn't result in a rushed existence -- or a paralyzing fear of when the clock will stop ticking.

Time's value instead informs her teaching style. She must honor her students' prized time with her utmost devotion to their progress.

As artistic director and founder of Pan Harmonia, formerly called Keowee Chamber Music, it makes her cherish every eclectic note in the group's 11th annual festival, starting Thursday.

Most important, time heightens Steinbeck's daily perspective, ensuring that she keeps her family life balanced with her ever-growing work schedule, now further occupied with launching the Asheville Chamber Music Institute at UNC Asheville, a weeklong exploration for adult amateur musicians in June.

"With children, you get a sense of the passing of time," said Steinbeck, mother of son Galen Abell, 14, and daughter Charlie Abell, 11. "When Charlie was 3, we were playing in the backyard, and she said, 'I have never had this day before.'

"It was a poignant reminder of the uniqueness of each day. As adults, we tend to forget this, but for a young child everything is new and fresh," she said.

"Also, that moment was a reminder of the brevity of life and our time here," she continued. "Being aware of that helps me strive to add beauty to this world. Maybe, just maybe it will offset all the darkness a wee bit.

"My children inspire me along that path. I want to be able to look back and know I did what I could to bring love and light, of which I think playing music is good expression."

A daily duet

Music and family share Steinbeck's daily life, even today, a day of flower deliveries and breakfasts-in-bed across the country for Mother's Day. "I'll be relaxing with my family during the day and playing a (benefit concert) in the evening," the 49-year-old said.

During the week, her responsibilities to her craft and commitments harmonize with the needs of her children. After her alarm buzzes at 6:30 a.m., her first focus is on getting Galen, a budding scientist and tech wiz, and Charlie, a freckle-faced adventurer with energy and long limbs to match her mother's, out the door of their Norwood Park home.

Then she picks up her constant companion, a wooden flute made by her husband, Chris Abell, for a half-hour of what she calls her "flute yoga," a time dedicated to stretching her lungs and lips through scales and long tones.

Steinbeck credits the energy she exhausts checking off every pencil-scrawled duty in her planner with her "oxygenated blood" from breathing in and blowing out through her treasured instrument.

Abell, whose international flute company is based in Grovewood Studios, is the reason that Steinbeck returned to Western North Carolina after decades of playing around the world.

On vacation from her home at the time, San Francisco, Steinbeck came for an all-class reunion for what is now Carolina Day School in 1995. Abell, a decade her senior, performed with an Irish music trio during the event. They were introduced by a mutual friend, and their love story began with just a simple exchange of business cards.

"It's weird and wonderful that a flutist and flute maker are together," said Steinbeck, who ended up running into Abell later on that weekend on Wall Street, and embarked on what is now a more than 15-year relationship.

When they decided to settle in Asheville in 1997 after the birth of their first child, it was a homecoming Steinbeck said she never "fathomed."

Her parents moved to Waynesville in 1971 from Chattanooga, Tenn., and it was in Western North Carolina that she was first stunned by the "sonic power" of a symphony, and where her fourth-grade fingers memorized her first song, "Goober Peas," on a recorder.

It was in the Asheville Civic Center in the late 1970s that she saw rock group Heart's dynamic frontwoman Ann Wilson play a wooden flute, and this teen raised on rock 'n' roll knew the flute was actually cool.

But after studying music in Cleveland, living in Europe by way of a Fulbright Scholarship to Royal Conservatory in Belgium and settling in bustling San Francisco, she felt far away from this place that was once so pivotal.

"Leaving San Francisco was so hard," she said, "but I had this beautiful baby boy, and his dearness and the intimacy of that relationship really helped me get through it."

A teaching mother

Galen's love was a reliable support as Steinbeck built up her stable of music students and began playing concerts in the area, starting with a packed show at Basilica of Saint Lawrence in 1998.

"It's a spiritual thing for me to play," she said. "It's like a ministry."

She wants everyone in the audience to experience what she calls "a heart zing," a jolt of awareness and bliss exclusive to the experience of live, acoustic music.

And once Charlie was born three years after Galen, she had her "muse."

"When I play, I sing to her," Steinbeck said.

When her children were little, she spent most of her days at home, practicing between three-minute showers and photographing the elaborate architecture Galen created with his blocks. Although her professional resume is thinner during this period, she said she is a better teacher and musician since becoming a mother.

"I play from my heart now," she said.

As a teacher, Steinbeck's motherly mastery of balancing discipline with nurturing encouragement shines, according to Connie Bouldin, who has been taking lessons from Steinbeck for the last three years.

"She is a very affirming teacher," said Bouldin, of Asheville. "She finds out where you are and takes you from there. She is very challenging and doesn't allow me to be satisfied with mediocrity, but she also celebrates the accomplishments."

And when Steinbeck plays, she transports Bouldin, she said, and inspires this adult-onset flute player to keep practicing. "She puts her spirit into her music, her music always reaches to my heart and rejuvenates and encourages me."

For her older students like Bouldin, Steinbeck is honored that these people choose to spend their limited free time with her.

"For the kids, I hope I can open their world up," she said, adding that music is a way to teach critical thinking, problem solving and processing.

"I like to look at music three-dimensionally," she said. "I teach sound first and foremost but also that music is language, poetry and math."

These days, Steinbeck teaches only two afternoons a week. "I am so concerned about how fast my time with my kids is going," she said.

World vision

Because of how quickly the weekends fill up with performances around the Southeast, Steinbeck often takes her children along with her. For the weeks leading up to the concert, Galen will whistle or sing the flute part she's been practicing in her home studio. She said he'll be amazed it's the same song once she's accompanied on stage by the small group of musicians that are essential to chamber music.

Although admittedly hard to classify, Steinbeck said, chamber music is more about the process and execution of music rather than the type of music performed.

"Chamber music is a democracy," she said, noting that between two and nine musicians usually play acoustic instruments in a chamber music group. "You get to say with your friends what you want to play and how you want to play it. There is no conductor determining what you do."

Chamber music appealed to Steinbeck because it's self-determining, small groups of people. It's intimate. It's family.

In this year's Pan Harmonia Festival, she's performing everything from classical to contemporary and world music. Even her favorite music to perform reflects this range: Bach, Latin music and Brazilian choros.

The origin of her CD collection also aligns with her passport stamps. An avid traveler, Steinbeck tries to teach her children compassion and global sensitivity through their journeys.

She even thinks of money in units of airplane ticket prices: For instance, the family doesn't have cable television after she determined that they would be spending \$600 a year for the access.

"I thought, 'Where could I go for this money?'" she said of the bill.

Galen got his first passport stamp at 20 months old, and since then, the family has been to Europe several times, as well as Mexico.

"Flute conventions are our family holidays," she said, and one recently took them to Madrid for a week.

This integration of family and work is how her world functions. But she puts her flute down at the end of the day; she stops checking her email. It's how time, the force she respects so much, does not become her master.

She cooks dinner fresh almost every night and will pick up a book, like "The Immortal life of Henrietta Lacks" or a recent issue of The New Yorker, before turning off her bedroom light to start the routine over again the next morning.

Steinbeck still wishes she had more time to do something like join a book club, and she admits she doesn't always have time to take her beloved Corgi mix, Sapphire, on the long walks those short four legs need every day.

But Steinbeck is grateful she has never had a traditional 9-to-5 job, that by being her own boss, she's been able to witness so closely the journey of her children from curious, crawling toddlers to young people with strengths and ambitions all their own.

"They are my best work," she said.

Kate Steinbeck

Education: Masters of music, San Francisco Conservatory; Fulbright Scholar to Royal Conservatory, Liege, Belgium; bachelor of music, Baldwin-Wallace College.

Family: Husband Chris Abell; son Galen, 14; daughter Charlie, 11; two cats, Tinker and Bela Bartok, and a Corgi mix, Sapphire.

Occupation: Flutist, producer, director, artistic director and founder of Pan Harmonia.

Hobbies: Spending time with friends and family; traveling; learning languages and about history and other cultures; reading; walking her dog.