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Partners in harmony

A musically woven life: Tacoma violist Tim Christie and violinist Maria Sampen are a husband-and-wife team who work together at home and on stage

By ROSEMARY PONNEKANTI; Staff writer

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At their North Tacoma home, Tim Christie (viola) and Maria Sampen (violin) work with their daughter, Charlotte, on playing the violin using pizzicato, a playing technique that involves plucking the string of the instrument. The Tacoma couple teach at the University of Puget Sound and record with other musicians.

BY DREW PERINE/THE NEWS TRIBUNE — The Olympian

- **Maria Sampen**

Age: 35

Instrument: Violin as well as viola and piano

Hometown: Bowling Green, Ohio

Job: Violin teacher at the University of Puget Sound, co-founder of Walla Walla Chamber Music Festival, teacher at Brevard music festival. She plays with the IRIS orchestra, Second City Chamber Series, Brave New Works, pop and recording back-up orchestras.

Likes to play: New classical music

Likes to listen to: Folk, world, The Beatles, salsa and '70s ballad singers. "Maria doesn't like anxiety in music," says Christie.

Nonmusic interests: Hiking, skiing, yoga, gardening, crafts.

If she played another instrument, it would be: Cello.

Tim Christie

Age: 34

Instrument: Viola as well as violin

Hometown: Washington, D.C.

Job: Violin/viola teacher at UPS, co-founder of Walla Walla Chamber Music Festival, teacher at Brevard music festival. He plays with the IRIS orchestra, Pacific Northwest Ballet orchestra, Second City Chamber Series, Brave New Works, pop and recording back-up orchestras.

Likes to play: New classical music

Likes to listen to: Opera – "I love it a lot."

Nonmusic interests: Fly fishing, skiing

If he played another instrument, it would be: Opera singing. "I want to be Scarpia (the villain in 'Tosca')."

Catch a concert

Want to hear Maria Sampen and Tim Christie play? Check out this concert at the University of Puget Sound, and keep your eye on the UPS concert calendar for more. You also can find them at the Walla Walla Chamber Music Festival (www.wwcmmf.org) June 1-18.

What: Dvork's Piano Quintet and other works

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday

Where: Schneebeck Hall at UPS, 1500 N. Warner St., Tacoma

Admission: Free

Information: 253-879-3419, www.events.pugetsound.edu

From the sidewalk outside Tim Christie's North Tacoma home, you can hear music practice. As Christie, a violist

and violinist, works his way through part of Mozart's Symphony No. 35, he repeats phrases to the endless tick of a metronome, striving for perfection.

What you can't hear, though, is the person listening – Christie's wife, Maria Sampen, who's also a professional violinist and who's giving him critical feedback.

It seems like either a recipe for torture or a match made in heaven. Sampen and Christie are not only married, they teach together at the University of Puget Sound and play together in ensembles ranging from exclusive national chamber groups to rock band gigs. For this Tacoma couple, however, being partners in harmony is not only good for their musicianship, it helps their relationship too – and benefits students and audiences alike.

“When we were 19, we'd play for 10 minutes together and then go storming down the corridor,” recalls Christie with a smile. Tall and blond, with a Gerard Depardieu kind of face, Christie doesn't strike you as the argumentative type. Nor does Maria Sampen: petite, with long curly hair and dark eyes, and a calm demeanor. Playing right next to someone, though, can be fraught with strong feelings and sensitivities.

But Sampen and Christie have now had years of practice together and a lifetime of similar musical experiences to keep them in tune.

“When I was 14, my parents began teaching at Interlochen,” says Sampen, referring to the famous summer music camp in Michigan. “It was there that I realized I wanted to do music (as a career), and that's where I met Tim, when I was 16.”

A CROSSING OF PATHS

With her mother a pianist and composer, and her father a saxophonist, Sampen says it was “always a foregone conclusion” that she would play music. She began violin at age 3, but after tripping and breaking the instrument in a concert, she switched to piano, studying it seriously all through school in Bowling Green, Ohio. At 9, though, she encountered the violin in a school program and came home begging to learn again.

Meanwhile, in the Washington, D.C., area, Christie – one year younger than Sampen – also began violin at age 9. Soon afterward, he started attending Interlochen, the eight-week summer music camp that was to be, as it was for Sampen, the backbone of his musical education. As a sophomore, he took up the viola, and later headed for the University of Michigan to work on bachelor's degrees in English and violin.

Sampen was already there. They studied with the same teacher, Paul Kantor, but didn't always get along. There was plenty of stomping down corridors, and Sampen even hooked Christie up on dates with her roommate.

Eventually, though, they began dating each other, and after Sampen returned to Michigan for her doctorate after earning a master's degree at Rice University, they began looking for jobs. In 2002, Sampen won the violin professorship that Tacoma Symphony Orchestra conductor Ed Seferian had just vacated at UPS, and Christie followed her here.

They married in 2003, and have been playing musical counterpoint ever since – chamber music at UPS concerts, the Second City Chamber Series, teaching their own and each others' students, and touring with musicians. They both love and champion new music, and work with composers; four years ago they jointly started the Walla Walla Chamber Music Festival. Yet, they also have impressive independent careers, Sampen playing as soloist with orchestras around the country, and Christie playing with the Pacific Northwest Ballet orchestra.

CRITICISM AND COMPANIONSHIP

Storming out of practice sessions is a thing of the past. “We routinely get criticism from each other,” says Christie. “Initially, it was a source of conflict; now it's great. In working on our relationship, we can work on our musicianship. Maria can say in rehearsal, “You're flat,” which is usually something that's a really sensitive issue,

and from her it's not personal, just business. That lets you relax."

The partnership also makes more companionable a musical career that includes traveling to play with widely varied groups: the exclusive IRIS chamber orchestra with soloists such as cellist Yo-Yo Ma, the Ann Arbor, Mich.-based new music ensemble Brave New Works, Key Arena gigs with groups such as Bellevue heavy metal band Queensryche, or Seattle recording sessions for movies like "Harold and Kumar" and the video game Halo.

"We get to go on tour together, which is usually pretty lonely," Christie says. "We spend time together, we play together. To have someone in the group you know you can trust is so good."

"We do disagree quite a bit," points out Sampen, citing Bruch's famous violin concerto as an example of a piece about which they have completely different ideas of fingering and bowing. "But now we're better at disagreeing without getting worked up about it."

The ability to disagree and still work together helps when they teach the same students – which they do often. "We can present different opinions to students, so they themselves have to choose which way they are going to play it," Christie says. "That (ability to choose) is when a student reaches maturity. And we get to play good cop/bad cop: Maria's the good cop, usually."

"Tim and Maria are both really wonderful collaborative musicians," says Svend Ronning, concertmaster of the Tacoma Symphony and director of the Second City Chamber Series. "Maria has a voluptuous sound, which makes her a distinct voice in new music. Tim's a very intelligent musician, very thoughtful – and he plays like that too, with great understanding and poetry."

MAKING MUSIC TOGETHER

With a husband and wife playing the same instruments (Sampen also plays viola) and alternating between the leading lines of quartets and quintets, though, there is potential for power struggles.

"We tend to get along together better when he plays viola and I play violin," says Sampen with a slightly guilty laugh.

"Yeah," agrees Christie, who likes the viola because it gives his big frame more space and challenge, and for the inner voice it occupies in chamber music. "You know the saying – viola players have congresses, but violinists have competitions."

Whatever the process, the outcome gets good marks.

"I've heard Tim and Maria play everything from Bach to Berio together," says Ronning. "They do it with a spark and a great deal of joy. You can tell they're a couple."

As Sampen and Christie talk about their gigs – the summer festival in Brevard, N.C. ("We get to play together all summer!" says Sampen), the Walla Walla Chamber Music Festival ("It's just as beautiful as Aspen, there ... and Maria's features all softened whenever we went there, it reminds her of Bowling Green," says Christie) or even the rock band back-up gigs they occasionally do ("Rod Stewart's nice. He's really short," says Sampen) – their conversation plays like chamber music. They finish each other's sentences, build on each other's ideas, tease each other about their respective ages, check on each other's memories.

They're also rising to a new teamwork challenge: parenting their 4-year-old daughter, Charlotte.

"I like hearing them play at concerts," says Charlotte, before pointing out a drawing on the refrigerator that shows "Daddy really sad" because he's going to the "Nutcracker" and not taking her to the park. While Charlotte has her own tiny violin, Sampen and Christie want her to take her own musical path: opera.

"I love singing!" Charlotte declares, and starts singing her way through the Queen of the Night's aria in Mozart's

“Magic Flute.”

“It’s a long road,” says Christie, who also loves opera and listens to it regularly with his daughter. “Opera might be the right thing for her ... the story, the music, and, of course, the costumes.”

Asked which of her parents is the better musician, Charlotte doesn’t hesitate: “Momma.”

Christie just laughs.

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