

Circumnavigation: The soundtrack

A Great Noyse imagines music on Drake's ship

BY AMY SMART, TIMES COLONIST JUNE 23, 2012



Singers Paul Boughen and Gwendolyn Jamieson, with Cuyler Page and Bill Jamieson playing the shawm and Bob Fraser on the sackbut.

Photograph by: Bruce Stotesbury, timescolonist.com (June 2012)

Every good road trip calls for some decent tunes. Even Sir Francis Drake knew that.

The 16th-century English admiral carried many essentials on his famed voyage around the globe - and along with the food, water and weapons were a few musicians to provide the soundtrack.

"It's really something because they were pretty small ships," said musician Bill Jamieson. "So music must have been pretty important for Drake, if he actually made room for four or five musicians onboard."

But what tracks were so hot that Drake couldn't imagine circling the globe without them? What would the long-gone instruments have sounded like? And what would life be like as a roadie musician, tagging along on the circumnavigation?

If these questions are racing through your head - look no further. Jamieson and the four other members of A Great Noyse, a local Renaissance wind ensemble dedicated to playing "early music," tonight will retell the seaman's story from the imagined perspective of Drake's musicians. They'll perform songs that Drake would have heard on period-appropriate instruments, at 7: 30 p.m. in the Historic Courtroom

at the Maritime Museum of B.C. Tickets are \$18, or \$15 for students and seniors, and can be reserved by phoning the museum at 250-385-4222 or at the door, subject to availability.

While the mists of time have obscured the specific songs performed over the three-year circumnavigation, Jamieson and his crew have put together a playlist using educated guesses.

"It would be music that Drake certainly would have been familiar with," Jamieson said.

You couldn't call yourself a sailor in 1578 without joining in on the chorus of Bring Us in Good Ale, a raucous anthem.

And who can forget the lively ceremonial hit Pastime and Good Companie, composed by none other than the reigning Queen Elizabeth I's father, Henry VIII? As a hotshot explorer, Drake would surely have heard it at one of Lizzie's rockin' court parties.

"It's all very accessible and easy to listen to," Jamieson said of the set list they've put together. "It's not obscure or high-brow. It's very tuneful kind of stuff."

Of course, there's the challenge of producing that authentic, era-appropriate sound. "There are 400-year-old violins, but unfortunately, wind instruments don't last that long," Jamieson said. "The only original wind instruments are in museums, because you're blowing damp air into them all the time, so they're a bit fragile."

Instead, the members of A Great Noyse have collected about 30 reproductions of Renaissance and medieval instruments from the pre-Baroque era.

Tonight's audience can look forward to the kazoolike buzz of the double-reeded "crumhorn," the big, loud sound of the "shawm," the oboe's precursor, and as well as whatever flexible pitch emerges from the early-version trombone charmingly called the "sackbut."

A Great Noyse includes Jamieson, Cuyler Page, Ann Fraser, Bob Fraser and Stacey Boal. They also play contemporary instruments, in addition to their early music ones - and the latter two members perform with the Victoria Symphony on bass trombone and viola, respectively.

A Great Noyse has invited Paul Boughen, Geoffrey Espin and Brian Groos to sing together as "Drake's Men," as well as Jamieson's 15-year-old daughter, Gwendolyn, who will sing the part of "ship's boy."

The group will weave together the songs with a narrative of the journey, from the perspective of one musician, that's based on historical accounts written by other ship passengers.

"So it's in the voice of the musician, kind of like a journalist who travels around the world and talks about what it's like for him, aboard this ship," said Jamieson. "Sometimes at concerts, musicians will stand up and give a short musicology lesson between pieces. But we kind of like the idea that audiences may be a bit more entertained by a story." asmart@timescolonist.com