

ON THE BEAT

Daisy Jopling: Cairo > Peekskill

By Thomas Staudter



It had been a while since I'd caught up with Daisy Jopling, the dynamic and enterprising violin virtuoso who has called Peekskill her home these last 14 years. With her next local concert appearance fast approaching—Jopling and her band will perform at the Paramount Hudson Valley Theater on Saturday, Mar. 25—it was time to give her a call.

We met at the Peekskill Coffee House and then walked across the street to take a picture in front of the Paramount; seeing her name on the marquee, she said, “Always gives me butterflies.”

Jopling's show will be a recreation of a performance she mounted at the Great Pyramids in Egypt last November, when she was invited to collaborate with some of the Middle East's most famous musicians and put on a production that included over 120 school-age children.

“I know it's going to be a joyful night for everybody,” the violinist-composer said, noting that the Peekskill show is going to include 61 local students performing on stage with her. “The kids get a really big kick about playing on stage, and whenever I bump into a student who performed with me years ago, they always say it was one of the best experiences they ever had.”

Jopling's concert, which is billed as “Irradiance at the Great Pyramids of Egypt, Recreated” will feature a number of the Middle Eastern musicians the violinist has worked with, along with other like-minded accompanists from around the metropolitan region, and the opening act will be an Egyptian pop singer, Nermeen Wasfy.

“It is such a privilege to collaborate and perform with the musicians who will be with me on Saturday,” Jopling said.

Jopling first traveled to Cairo in December 2021 for two weeks' worth of music workshops with student musicians, a program that was funded by the Rotary Club of Bronx. While in Cairo, Jopling was urged to continue working with the students and started her own instructional program there, much like the “Strings” program she started in the Peekskill schools soon after moving to the northern Westchester burg. Jopling's return to Cairo culminated in her concert at the Pyramids, a venue that is basically off limits to musicians who aren't Egyptian. (The Grateful Dead famously performed for three nights at the Giza Pyramid complex in September 1978.)

Jopling is an artist who stretches the limits of her incredible talent to keep finding new challenges. Four years ago, she released *Who's Who*, a ten-track collection of covers of The Who, arguably one of the greatest rock bands of all time. The album is a courageous concept: interpreting some of the most-loved songs from the rock canon can be tricky territory to navigate. You could expect Jopling, a native of England, to remark that it was a project she'd been waiting her whole life to undertake.

"I grew up in a very sheltered environment, with no television and a lot of early exposure to classical music," said the violinist. Born in London to bookish parents—dad was a lawyer and mom was a school teacher—Jopling and her brother and sister were encouraged to study music early on. Meanwhile, the family resettled to an isolated farmhouse outside Colchester, about two hours' drive northeast of London.

One of Jopling's earliest memories involves asking her parents for a violin. Her favorite aunt was a professional violinist who visited their home frequently, and before long she became a life-long mentor for young Daisy, who began serious lessons on the instrument when she was just three years old.

And all that exposure to classical music? It worked. Not only has Jopling enjoyed a professional music career since her teens, her brother serves as the conductor for the English National Ballet, and her sister is the principal violist in the Norwegian Opera and Ballet Orchestra.

Jopling moved to New York in 2006, when she met her husband Joe Brown, a Peekskill native who has since passed away, and the couple decided to settle in the rivertown three years later. Characteristically, Jopling embraced her new stomping ground with enthusiasm, and began to work with local school-age children and teens, and incorporated them into her musical productions.

"Peekskill is such an incredible community," said Jopling. "I love it every day. The most amazing thing is that I've met so many people in Peekskill, young and old, who are absolutely passionate about music. And I'm so proud to be working with the younger musicians in town."

Indeed, the free after-school program Jopling founded, the Ovation Strings Program, currently has about 16 students onboard, between the ages of 7 and 9. Jopling's local concerts are unique because her string students share the stage with her, along with usually more than 50 other Peekskill students from various choral ensembles.

"I'm all about helping my community and inspiring young people and getting them interested in music and playing," Jopling said. In turn, the community has embraced the violinist as well and flocked to see her big shows, like her original show "Awakening," which premiered at Lincoln Center in 2017.

It was while conversing with some of the parents that Jopling first became aware about this rock band from England called The Who.

"A lot of people said I should check out this song of theirs called 'Baba O'Riley,' which has this great violin solo at the end, so I did," said Jopling. "Of course, I loved it, and soon started delving into all the band's music. I found The Who to be so uplifting and joyful, even though the lyrics can be rather bleak and dark. But there's so much emotion in their music. Anyway, I started performing 'Baba O'Riley' in my shows, and everyone loved it. The song fit in so well with what we were doing."

When it came time to think about making a new recording in 2019 (and fourth solo set—the previous collections were *Key to the Classic*, *The Healer Within* and *Awakening*), Jopling said she immediately wanted to record a program of entirely music from The Who. Winnowing down

her favorites was a difficult task, and in the end, she went with songs just from two of the band's albums, *Tommy* and *Who's Next*.

The decision to keep the covers so focused is a good one. Jopling's violin replaces the vocal articulations of the melodies, but with additional flourishes and deepened harmonic fills, which end up giving the music an emotional lift. The powerhouse arrangements of rockers like "Won't Get Fooled Again," "Sparks" and "I'm Free" push the violinist into giddy improvisations, and then her exquisitely tender side is heard in "Behind Blue Eyes" and "Amazing Journey." It's a whole different way of listening to The Who, and it works.

"Instead of thinking about The Who as rock, I end up seeing it as just exciting music that is hard to categorize," Jopling said. "When people ask me about rock, I'm more apt to reply in terms of how the music makes me feel. I love the hard, raw emotions you find rock."

"Also, I don't have the childhood and youthful connections to rock that a lot of other people have," she continued. "I was brought up listening only to classical music, and that's what I have childhood and emotional connections to. Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony is one of my favorites, a piece of music I love to play. But it was written over 100 years ago. So, what is the music saying to me? Or for me?"

"Now, you have a lot of different musicians embellishing the works of Bach. But when I was growing up and studying music"—Jopling studied at the Royal College of Music, Guildhall School of Music and Drama and Vienna Conservatory—"I would get in trouble for writing and playing my own cadenzas or improvising to Mozart. 'How dare you play different notes!' I would be told. 'Those composers are geniuses, what do you know?' That sort of study was a straitjacket for me.

"I have tremendous respect for classical musicians, and all musicians, in fact, who get to a certain level because of their incredible discipline and dedication. To become a professional musician requires an unbelievable amount of practice. But I'm not fond of playing too much of the same thing. I want to be me. The boundlessness of creativity appeals to me. And since moving to New York, I have shed everything that stopped me from finding my own voice."

That voice is now bold enough to mix classical music with rock, reggae, *le jazz hot* and Middle Eastern sounds. The big, big world is a special place for music fans with big ears.

The Daisy Jopling Band and special guests will perform "Irradiance at the Great Pyramids of Egypt" on Saturday, Mar. 25 at the Paramount Hudson Valley Theater, 1008 Brown St., Peekskill, NY. The concert begins at 8 p.m. For tickets and more info, call (914) 739-0039 or visit paramounthudsonvalley.com.