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Photography by Mark Hutchinson

# Threefold talent

A rare flute-oboe-piano trio expands its audience and launches a new stage in its Lawrence-based musical career

In the live performance studio at Kansas Public Radio, three women run through a musical composition, the voices of their oboe, flute and piano playing off each other, blending, harmonizing. As the last notes fade, they pause, an eyebrow or two raised, wordlessly communicating their reaction to this practice session.

"When people play together in an ensemble, you don't necessarily have the same musical ideas," says flutist Annie Gnojek, who with oboist Margaret Marco and pianist Ellen Bottorff formed the chamber trio Allégresse three years ago. "When we play together, it's almost like I know what they're going to play before they play it."

The three have a bond beyond the music they create. They finish each other's sentences. They have been known to rearrange travel plans in favor of shopping, keeping their concert commitments but unanimously agreeing that a new pair of shoes trumps an extra-early arrival.

Yet underlying the fun they have in each other's company is a shared desire to elevate Allégresse to a prominent position in the minds of music lovers.

Pianist Bottorff, a lecturer and faculty member in the music and dance program at the University of Kansas, says the group's long-range goal is for classical music fans to "immediately think of Allégresse" when they think of a piano-oboe-flute trio. The musicians want their name to be synonymous with their instruments in the same way Yo-Yo Ma equals cellist or James Galway equals flutist.

## New recording, new compositions

Toward making that vision a reality, the group is releasing a CD in November featuring pieces ranging from the Baroque and Roman-

tic periods to the 20<sup>th</sup> century—all favorites of either the musicians or their audience.

Combined with income from their performances and a grant from KU's General Research Fund, CD sales will help support a new musical piece the group has commissioned from composer Gabriela Lena Frank.

Frank has composed for Kronos, the iconoclastic classical quartet, and for Chanticleer, perhaps the world's leading men's vocal ensemble.

"Now, she's going to write for us," says an awestruck Marco, who also works as an associate professor of music and dance at KU.

The new piece promises to help fill a void in compositions written specifically for oboe, flute and piano. Where string quartets may choose from a multitude of pieces composed just for them, the Allégresse musicians often must adapt compositions to suit their three instruments.

Frank, influenced by her Peruvian ancestry, will draw on the work of female poets such as Virginia Ayllón Soria from Bolivia, Aminta Buenaño of Ecuador and Lily Flores Palomino of Peru. The music will be written in such a way that the trio's modern instruments emulate indigenous Latin American instruments. Gnojek's flute will mimic a northern Andean zampona (panpipe), Marco's oboe will represent a southern Andean erquencho and Bottorff's piano will be used in a percussive way reminiscent of a charango, a South American guitar-like instrument made from an armadillo shell.

When Allégresse premieres the piece—next summer in England, they hope—Frank will appear with them, reading the poems that inspired each movement in their original languages.

"There really aren't a lot of pieces for this combination, so it really is something that the music world needs," says Marco.

The trio plans to begin rehearsals on the 20- to 25-minute piece in the spring, and the musicians already have plans to make it the cornerstone of their second CD. All of the works on the second CD will be written specifically for Allégresse, further increasing the compositions available for oboe, flute and piano trios. In addition to Frank, the group is



The Lawrence-based musicians say their goal is to make the name Allégresse synonymous with "piano-oboe-flute trio."

## IT NEVER HURTS TO ASK ...

Music written specifically for a flute-oboe-piano combination can be hard to find. The women of Allégresse often adapt compositions meant for other instruments, but sometimes the perfect piece comes in the most serendipitous of ways.

"Marbella Fantasy," a piece featured on their first CD, came to their attention in just such a fashion.

"Sometimes I can't sleep, so I was Googling," explains Annie Gnojek.

She fed the online search engine the terms flute, oboe, piano and contemporary.

"This piece comes up, a gorgeous piece of music," she says.

On a whim, Gnojek e-mailed the composer, Andrey Rubtsov, a young director and oboist with the Russian National Orchestra, and asked whether Allégresse could purchase the music.

The piece, written as a wedding present for the composer's friend, had never been published. Instead of selling it to the trio, Rubtsov e-mailed the music to Gnojek—free of charge.

"He just let us do it because he wants his music out in the world," Gnojek says.

Allégresse performed the U.S. premiere of "Marbella Fantasy" a year ago at Grace Episcopal Cathedral in Topeka, and the group's CD marks the first studio recording of the piece.

*(You can hear Andrey Rubtsov perform "Marbella Fantasy" in full and download the sheet music for some of his compositions on his website [www.andreyrubtsov.com](http://www.andreyrubtsov.com).)*



working with a number of other composers, including colleague Kip Haaheim, KU associate professor of music and dance.

### Family ties

The women work just as hard on the business side of making Allégresse a success as they do on the creative side perfecting their music. All profits from their performances are funneled back into promoting the group. A few years ago, they expanded their contacts in the state's music communities by becoming part of the Kansas Arts on Tour roster of performers. The resulting performances, educational tours and master's classes at universities and colleges across the state and other Midwest locations have raised their profile.

Closer to home, the women find they could not succeed without their network of friends and family. Their first CD would have been many more years in the making if not for the talents of Marco's and Gnojek's husbands. Jason Slote, Marco's husband, donated his time to serve as their recording engineer. Gnojek's husband, David, designed the artwork for the CD as well as their website and press materials.

"We're very fortunate to have very supportive families," says Gnojek, a private flute instructor. "They believe in us."

The business side of business is necessary, but the opportunities to share their artistry make the hard work worthwhile.

On one educational tour in western Kansas, the musicians performed for a group of boys from troubled homes. In an emotional reception after the show, the joy and gratitude of the boys drove home the true value of the musicians' chosen path.

"You think, OK, we have a gift to be able to reach out to others," says Marco. "Not just to perform, but a gift that we touch people." •

### LISTEN TO ALLÉGRESSE

Allégresse's first CD, *Allégresse*, is available at all of the trio's performances and through its website, [WWW.ALLEGRESSE.ORG](http://WWW.ALLEGRESSE.ORG).