



Dutch courage

Amsterdam-based Tasmanian violinist **Frances Thé** is passionate about putting a contemporary spin on classic performances

words **NATASHA CICA** portrait **SAM ROSEWARNE**

On her annual holiday trek home to Tasmania from Amsterdam, concert violinist Frances Thé hasn't packed a single pretty frock for performance. Instead, there's the basic all-black outfit that is standard for ensemble players. Her suitcase also contains a magical collection of violin bows from different historical periods.

Working with a range of ensembles and orchestras, Thé operates at the leading edge of a movement called HIP (historically informed performance), which involves contemporary players trying to get rid of all their baggage – "our automatic habits and musical assumptions" – and playing on period instruments, to really get inside the musical expression the composer had in mind.

"That's my passion. I have about 12 historical bows, a modern violin and two early instruments – one for baroque, another for slightly later repertoire. I also have a beautiful old baroque viola. And yes, a dozen bows is handy for doing all that," she says.

"Why do I enjoy HIP? It enlightens and enriches me as a musician. It has a spin-off on my modern playing, it frees me in a way. I think it's also connected with why I made the decision more than 20 years ago

to step away from Australia, the culture I knew, to go and understand other cultures, the way people do things differently."

In that sense, Thé is following in her family's footsteps. Her paternal grandfather was a farmer's son from China's Fujian province who left to make a new start in Indonesia running a small business. His name was Thé Ko Wan, which means "seeking perfection". At the urgings of his wife, all of Thé Ko Wan's children became professionals.

In the case of Frances' father Gregory – who was born in the village of Wonokerto near Malang, raised in the colonial Dutch East Indies where he attended a Dutch-speaking school and lived through the Japanese occupation in World War II before Indonesia's independence – that trajectory involved emigration to Australia in 1955 to study engineering at the University of Adelaide.

In 1965, he was offered a position as a senior lecturer at the University of Tasmania and moved to Hobart. Soon after, he met his future wife, Gabrielle White, from Devonport – her distant ancestors include an English convict named John Say, who was transported to Van Diemen's Land in 1845 for stealing fowls, and her great-grandfather (also from England) who was a Baptist preacher who found his calling in Zeehan and was a respected figure in Launceston.

"At one point he married a young couple – the woman was already pregnant, so he tried to help them by dating the marriage certificate earlier. But the parents found out and had his head for it, so he went to prison – quite a fall," Thé says. "He didn't really recover. It's a pretty strong story. He was for the people, not the establishment."

When it came to the union of her parents, Thé says there was a bit of matchmaking involved.

"A cousin of my mum thought they'd be really suited, told my dad she needed a lift to Devonport and asked him to drive her," she says.

"Mum remembers she hardly said a word on the way up ... but they broke the ice."

The pairing, brave and unusual at the time, is one Thé believes delivered her special opportunities. One benefit was the supportive nudge her parents gave her to leave Tasmania as a young adult.

Thé was born in Hobart's Calvary Hospital and raised in the same classic 1960s-era house in Taroona at which she is staying with her parents at the time of this interview. Her favourite Tasmanian location is still the cliff end of Taroona Beach.

"As a child, I would walk down the track from the on top of those cliffs to swim there," she says.



ADDING STRINGS TO HER BOW: From opposite page, violinist Frances Thé stepped out of her comfort zone when she left Tasmania to broaden her horizons; a photo of Thé when she was 15 with a *Saturday Evening Mercury* article about her when she was 10; and the Amsterdam Sinfonietta string orchestra (Thé is standing, fourth from right), which she has been part of since she was invited to audition when she was in her mid-20s.

Thé started playing the violin when she was five. "A family friend, Peter Komlos – also born in Indonesia, to a Hungarian father, and working as principal violist in the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra – decided to start a Suzuki school in Hobart and asked my parents if we could be the guinea pigs," she says.

Peter died of a heart attack a year later, at just 37.

"Someone told us we had killed him, because of the stress of teaching us. He was incredibly patient with us as kids," Thé says.

Fortunately, she didn't stop playing the violin. From the age of eight, she played in the Tasmanian Youth Orchestra. Then she attended Tasmanian String Summer School masterclasses run by Czech-born Jan Sedivka and, after studying violin at Adelaide's Elder Conservatorium, she returned to Tasmania to do a graduate diploma with Sedivka.

"I was so lucky to grow up during the Sedivka era, because at that time Tasmania was really a centre for string players from all around the world," Thé says.

"Sedivka came here after the war, he brought a whole lot of students with him and was a great pedagogue and player, for the violin. If you consider what Tasmania would have been like without him, it would have been much less.

"This was such a rich environment for someone like me. I knew very early on I would become a classical musician – because of all the chances I had here, my way was somehow clearer.

"I had a lot of experience playing as an ensemble and orchestra player – it gave me a good edge when I went off abroad."

She left in the early '90s, aged 21. "When I finished with Sedivka, I was just a little bit too comfortable," she says. "I was working with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra and really enjoying that and my life here – but my dad was quite insistent I should broaden my horizons and move on, even though he knew it would be painful to have me at such a distance."

So Thé packed her bags for the Netherlands, where she'd lived for a year as a child with her parents and her elder brother Philip – now an IT consultant to Treasury in Tasmania – because of her dad's work.

"Looking back, that was the time the idea of living and working in Holland started," she says. "From an early age, I was focused on Europe as a kind of romantic dream. I remember saving my money to get there."

Thé didn't return to Tasmania for eight years.

"I flew to Indonesia and stayed for a few days with my relatives, including my grandmother. It was my first contact with them as an adult," she says. "Then I landed in the conservatorium in Utrecht. It was a real hothouse for violinists at the time. The amount of super-talent was overwhelming – I'd never experienced anything like it and haven't since. It was a real 'big fish in little pond becoming little fish in big pond' experience – hugely exciting, very stimulating. We were all practising like mad. It was a very ambitious atmosphere."

She stayed in Utrecht until 1998, when she eventually had the opportunity to study and work with "brilliant" HIP violinist and professor Antoinette Lohmann.

"The Netherlands really was the global cradle of the HIP movement, which started there in the 1960s," she says.

"Also, quite early on somebody spotted me and invited me to audition for an up-and-coming string orchestra – the venture that would later become Amsterdam Sinfonietta, where I still play today."

Barely 25, she already had her dream job.

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"At the time it didn't seem so amazing – it was a way to get a work permit and keep studying and be there," she says.

"But Sinfonietta has evolved incredibly over that period. Based in Amsterdam, we play all over the Netherlands and regularly abroad – Europe, China, Australia, North America and we are off to South America quite soon.

"It's a very idealistic group and it's been on the rise. At a point we chucked out the conductor and found a whole new way of working, which really has propelled us. It's the right place for me, it's a small group of only 21 people, and it matches what I feel about music and how I want to be making music."

So how exactly does she want to go about making music?

Partly, it's about working as a freelancer and keeping a portfolio of different professional projects that add up to a larger whole.

"Freelancing offers me a diversity of experience and the freedom of choosing my own direction," she says.

"Since the Dutch government slashed arts funding in 2012, I have seen many colleagues lose their fixed positions in top orchestras and have to start over. Job security has become an illusion."

"A decade ago, I studied to become a specialised translator from Dutch to English to ensure I had an extra string to my bow."

But for the time being she is focused mainly on music. Alongside her project-based work with Amsterdam Sinfonietta, Thé is busy building partnerships with various individual musicians to explore chamber music spanning the 17th to 19th centuries.

She's delving deeply into the long-lost art of rhetoric in music.

"It's all about a musical orator's power of persuasion, moving the heart and soul of the listener," she says. "As a performer, this gives me a more direct and personal connection with audiences."

And after leaving Tasmania, she'll stop in Sydney to do a gig with a new HIP ensemble called orchestra seventeen88.

"It's a small orchestra that performs the classical and romantic repertoire with period instruments," she says. "I know some of the people who started it and they asked me to join in. So I jumped at the opportunity, it's fantastic to see this starting in Australia."

She flies back to Amsterdam the same night as the last Sydney performance, to start her new European concert season the next day.

Is there a chance Thé might return to live in Tasmania?

"Becoming older, coming back to visit Tasmania has become an important part of my life," she says. "That's about reconnecting with people, also the place itself, waking up to the familiar bird calls. It's a healing thing that happens every time. I can let go of a lot of things. It's almost like I am somebody else over there – Amsterdam is pretty fast-paced; it's a relief to slow down. Here I have family and old friends ... I don't have that over there. That's the price I pay.

"When I come back and see what other people have, I don't feel envy but there's a recognition I'm missing that. But that's for them. I have chosen what's for me – and that's right."

Frances Thé performs with orchestra seventeen88 in two chamber concerts featuring Mendelssohn, Reicha, Mozart and Haydn in Sydney next Saturday and Sunday. Bookings can be made at orchestraseventeen88.com/concerts



Picture: MARCO BORGREVE