

JORJA FLEEZANIS

“Prepare to say goodbye to Jorja Fleezanis, the rebel with a violin,” announced the headline of an article in a Minneapolis newspaper in 2009, when she left the concertmaster position with the Minnesota Orchestra. Jorja joined the IU Jacobs School of Music to assume the position of professor of music (orchestral studies and violin) and the Henry A. Upper Chair in Orchestral Studies. Being a rebel or, perhaps more accurately, a pioneer, with or without the violin, may be the best way to describe her approach to all things musical, and perhaps nonmusical as well.

Jorja was born in Detroit, Michigan, the daughter of Greek immigrants. Her parents were not musicians but loved classical music. Early interest in the piano gave way to the study of the violin through a local teacher and icon, Ara Zerounian. Mr. Zerounian was a gifted and sympathetic mentor whom she admires and reveres to this day. She attended Cass Tech High School, a beacon for the arts in Detroit, and became even more enthusiastic about the violin and ensemble playing. Because of Zerounian’s affiliation with Interlochen Center for the Arts and its national music camp, she attended the summer camp program, and later the Interlochen Arts Academy, further fueling her passion for music.

Her college training was at the Cleveland Institute of Music and then the Cincinnati Conservatory. Immediately upon graduation, she joined the Chicago Symphony and then helped start and serve as concertmaster of the Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra. After this period, she helped found and was violinist of the Trio d’Accordo, which performed for nearly four years. She then became associate concertmaster of the San Francisco Symphony, where she played until 1989. During this period she met and married Michael Steinberg, the noted music critic, lecturer, and writer, who was then the orchestra’s program publications director and artistic advisor. This union had an immense professional impact on Jorja; through Michael’s influence, she began to see a larger vision of her art. During this period, she was a founding member of the FOG Trio, which also featured pianist Garrick Ohlsson and cellist Michael Grebanier. When she accepted Maestro



Edo de Waart’s invitation to serve as concertmaster of the Minnesota Orchestra for the 1989 season, she became one of the first female concertmasters of a major orchestra—a pioneer, indeed.

She spent two decades with the Minnesota Orchestra, collaborating with three music directors and premiering several works for her instrument in the process. One work, John Adams’ *Violin Concerto*, was given its world premiere by her with the Minnesota Orchestra in 1994, with Edo de Waart conducting. It has since become a standard piece in the solo violin repertory and has been recorded several times. She considers it one of her greatest achievements. She soloed annually with the orchestra, and brought to her performances a sense of musical adventure, if not outright musical rebellion. Besides the contemporary concertos of Barber, Britten, Ligeti, Sessions, Hindemith, Szymanowski, and Weill, she offered Gubaidulina’s *Offertorium*, Hartmann’s *Concerto Funebre*, Martin’s *Polyptich* and the Tippett *Triple Concerto*. She also gave the American premiere of Britten’s *Double Concerto for Violin and Viola* with her colleague Thomas Turner.

During her entire career, Jorja has maintained strong roles as a teacher, mentor, and coach. She was an adjunct faculty member of the University of Minnesota’s School of Music; faculty member of the Round Top International

Music Festival (1990–2007); artist in residence at the University of California, Davis; guest artist and teacher at the San Francisco Conservatory (1981–89); artist and mentor at the Music@Menlo Festival (2003–08); teacher and coach at the New World Symphony (1988–2008); faculty member at the Academy of the West (2016 to present); and a visiting teacher on several occasions at the Boston Conservatory, the Juilliard School, and Interlochen Arts Academy and Summer Arts Camp.

Within weeks of her arrival on campus in the fall of 2009, her impact on the Jacobs School of Music was immediate and notable. The five orchestras of the school were playing with a rigor and sheen the likes of which had not been heard or seen in a long time. This transformation was most noticeable in the violins and the other strings as well. Her coaching filtered through every orchestra, with results that sounded near-professional and inspired. One of her favorite projects during her time at the Jacobs School has been the preparation and mentoring of groups—containing both faculty and students—performing works of the Second Viennese School, most notably those of Schoenberg.

So what new paths lie ahead for this pathfinder, this pioneer? Jorja will continue her association with the Jacobs School whenever it is mutually agreeable and when she can tear herself away from her many personal projects. The most immediate project is the building of a dream home in northern Michigan near both Lake Michigan and Lake Leelanau on the western side of the lower peninsula. She has always loved the water and boundless forest of this area, and the new home will help store and preserve the extensive library of her late husband, Michael. She will be just minutes away from relatives in the area, as well as Interlochen, which was such a great influence in her young life. It will be her mentoring and coaching of orchestras, however—both student and professional, domestic and foreign—that will most likely fill her days.

Lawrence Hurst