



A master class with Jorja Fleezanis

By SF Classical Music Examiner, Stephen Smoliar
February 17, 6:41 AM



Jorja Fleezanis with the Minnesota Orchestra (from a [MinnPost.com article](#), courtesy of the Minnesota Orchestra)

Whenever I attend one of the Master Class events at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, I try to reflect on identifying a few key points that help me to understand better the nature musical pedagogy. Last night's teacher was Jorja Fleezanis, who had served on the Conservatory faculty between 1981 and 1989 while Associate Concertmaster of the San Francisco Symphony. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this class was the

breadth of approaches to composition taken in the selections performed for her. The first of her sessions involved the opening movement of the A minor piano trio by Maurice Ravel. This was followed by the opening movement of Bedřich Smetana's first string quartet in E minor, composed in 1876 with the descriptive title "*Z mého života*" (From My Life). The class then ended with the third and concluding part of Arnold Schoenberg's Opus 21 *Pierrot Lunaire*.

Each of these sessions provided a substantial body of material to possess. So my first impression was that Fleezanis managed her time far better than many of the "visiting masters" I have encountered in this series. This may be due in part to her orchestra experience, where rehearsals tend to be limited, requiring the time to be used to maximum advantage. Thus, she had the excellent habit of identifying one or two areas of concentration, perhaps under the assumption that what she taught in that limited context would then translate into more general approaches to practice. Thus, for both Ravel and Smetana one could almost map her concentration down to a limited number of measures, while in *Pierrot* she addressed only three of the seven poem settings that were performed.

Equally important was the way in which she

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made it clear (without overstressing the point) that she had *personal* experience with the music being performed. This was less a matter of here-is-how-I-do-it and more one of this-is-what-the-music-has-come-to-mean-to-me. This pedagogical strategy reminds us all that "executing the score" is a practice that can be discussed almost entirely in objective terms. When it comes to *playing the music*, however, we must depart the objective world (without shedding our experience) and divide our attention between the subjective and social worlds. Fleezanis never suggested that anything any of these compositions meant to *her* should mean the same to anyone else, but there was a clear message that what one does with one's instrument does not become music until one has come to find meaning in the performance.

Finally, I was struck by the extent to which each of last night's sessions appeared to be a continuation of an ongoing conversation. The Master Class was part of an extended visit that will culminate on Thursday evening with a Chamber Music Masters recital in the Concert Hall. These recitals always involve the visitor performing with both faculty and students; and last night Fleezanis drew upon one of the points she made to reflect on its applicability to Anton Webern's "Langsamer Satz," which is on the Thursday program. There was a lesson in this approach

to getting beyond compartmentalization that was as valuable as any of her observations about the works performed for her last night.

For more info: [San Francisco Conservatory of Music home page](#); [event page for Thursday's Chamber Music Masters recital](#).



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Stephen Smoliar

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