

VON TRAPP FAMILY

Werner von Trapp (1915 to 2007)

Elisabeth von Trapp (1955, Werner's daughter)

It is difficult enough to forge your own path when you have a famous name, but what if the source of its reputation is largely fictional?

Elisabeth von Trapp comes from one of the more celebrated families in music, the von Trapps of Austria who formed the Trapp Family Singers in the 1930s. She is the daughter of Werner von Trapp, one of the children in the musical troupe that was later depicted — with varying degrees of accuracy — in Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical, "The Sound of Music." Ms. von Trapp built a career on her own as a singer-songwriter, but now celebrates the connections, both real and fabricated.

"Every day there is something about the whole journey of 'The Sound of Music' that impacts my own life," she says from her home in Waitsfield, Vt. "It knocks on my door every day."

A recent tap has been from the Landestheater in Salzburg, Austria, which is producing the musical for the first time. Officials asked Ms. von Trapp to help explain it to Austrians, many of whom haven't seen the film. After all, Ms. von Trapp didn't just know Maria — the nun-in-training, tutor and eventual second wife of the father, Georg.

"I worked with her at the tea room in the lodge," she says, referring to the family's residence in Stowe, Vt., which they moved to a few years after emigrating from Austria in 1938. The family turned it into a ski lodge in the 1980s. "She was very motivated, ahead of her time, a strong and creative woman."

By the time Ms. von Trapp was born in 1954, the Trapp Family Singers were wrapping up a successful career. The film "Die Trapp Familie" was released in Germany in 1956, but it was the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical of 1959 starring Mary Martin and the later film version starring Julie Andrews that made the family a household name.

Typical of the complex relationship that the family has had with "The Sound of Music," Maria von Trapp agreed to have Life magazine take photos of her and Martin playing with the Trapp children

and grandchildren at the lodge, even though the musical took great liberties with Maria's memoirs,

"The Story of the Trapp Family Singers."

"When I was 4 years old, I was put in a dirndl dress and Mary Jane shoes," says Elisabeth von Trapp. "We went to see my grandmother, as we often would since my parents lived about a quarter-mile from the lodge. I saw a woman in an Austrian dress and she danced with us and ran up the hill. It was Mary Martin and there are photos of me running up the hill. She taught us some of the songs, like 'My Favorite Things.' There are beautiful scenes where my father is teaching her how to do yodeling songs."

These days Ms. von Trapp is keenly interested in seeing more of the real family's story told. "How do we fit into the story?" she asks. For instance, Georg's first wife, Agathe, is but a mention in the fictional account.

"She was very influential musically [on the family]. In an outbreak of scarlet fever, she nursed her children back to health, but got it, and then pneumonia, and died."

Ms. von Trapp's musical career is her own, but she occasionally will incorporate a medley from the musical or a song that the Trapp Family Singers performed.

"It is different being a solo performer," she says. "In a family that is musical, the greatest learning is that I have to do what I feel is best. The family loves

The

sound of

her own

music

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my singing, but it is different since it is contemporary or my own music. [But] they follow what I am doing and my father was very supportive."

One example is her bluegrass band, Elisabeth von Trapp & the Blue Train. Another is a new creation that comes to Pittsburgh this week when she arrives for a holiday show with the Empire Brass. It's a far cry from playing the guitar and incorporating a cellist, as she has for years in her solo work.

"This is a whole new [experience] for me, working with new musicians and looking at how my solo performing can be accompanied by brass quartet. I am very excited about it because at Christmastime there are so many beautiful carols that become so vibrant with brass."

Her inspiration for the program comes from Austria, but this time not from

Maria von Trapp or "The Sound of Music."

"As a 10-year-old I spent time in the square in Salzburg, and the music there was all brass. It was so magical and I have been thinking about that. That is the feel I would like to have for the concert."

It is in performing that Ms. von Trapp best connects in spirit to the Trapp Family Singers: "When I am in the middle of singing and performing I am so happy — there is a real joy."

That's what the sound of music can do, whether fact or fiction.

MUSIC PREVIEW

Empire Brass with Elisabeth von Trapp

Where: Carnegie Music Hall, Oakland.

When: 7:30 p.m. Monday.

Tickets: \$15-\$35; 412-624-4129.