

# VOICE OF THE LAME SONORE

*By Meredith Kennedy*

Two women, a piano, and a modified saw. What follows is an extraordinary tale of music, history, passion and the voice of an angel arising from the humblest of sources: a commonplace saw.



*Annette Scholten (left) and Nanke Flach*



*The Lame Sonore*

Cellist Annette Scholten purchased the saw for a programme in October 2011 that she presents with her friend, pianist Nanke Flach, for demonstrating the acoustics of sound to schoolchildren. This is a science and music programme in the northern region of the Netherlands through the University of Groningen (RuG) and Hanze University of Applied Sciences.

Intrigued by the tone, range and quality of the sounds produced by the oscillating saw blade, Annette wondered if it would be possible to produce —and harness— such sounds with a stringed bow applied to the saw. Perhaps not such an unusual thought for a professional cellist who has spent much of her life with a bow in her hand.



*Annette shows schoolchildren how the steel saw blade produces sound waves, in the Science and Music programme she does with Nanke Flach. Photo courtesy of Nanke Flach.*

Indeed it is possible, in the form of the *Lame Sonore* (pronounced *lam so-NOR*) a bowed instrument based on a carpenter's saw. It was first made in 1948 and played by Jacques Keller, and enjoyed a brief international debut. Marlene Dietrich entertained troops during WWII on the musical saw, and then on the *Lame Sonore* when it became available, but after this, it fell into obscurity.

With little information to go on, Annette researched the *Lame Sonore* and had one made for her by Alexis Faucomprez from France. While it's not actually made from a carpenter's saw it's very similar, with the spring steel metal blade (a nickel alloy most commonly used for musical instruments) tapering symmetrically to the tip. Like a saw left in a damp woodshed, the steel blade of the *Lame Sonore* will oxidize and rust without proper attention and care, and must be kept clean and polished with Quatuor metal polish. The natural oils left from a fingertip will also affect the blade's surface and lead to oxidizing, so Annette never actually touches the blade with her hands.

Nanke describes the *Lame Sonore* as comparable to a xylophone, being the same shape but without being cut into separate plates for each note. Both are *idiophones*,

which produce sound by the vibration of the whole instrument, without strings or membranes (such as with a violin or drum). The xylophone, however, is a *struck idiophone*, which uses a mallet to create vibration, while the *Lame Sonore* is a *friction idiophone*, creating vibration with the scraping of a bow across its edge.

Unlike the xylophone, the *Lame Sonore* is well suited for long legato lines since there are no physical spaces separating the notes. However, because of this, many *Lame Sonore*—and musical saw—players use a lot of glissando in searching for notes as they play. Proper training and serious practice (as is necessary when learning any musical instrument) is needed to overcome the challenges of playing out of tune, overuse of glissandi, wobbling vibrato and extraneous bowing sounds.

*Lame Sonore or Musical Saw? Unlike the Musical Saw, the Lame Sonore is not actually a saw, but designed for a similar function for producing sound as the flexible metal blade is bowed and bent, and played with a bow as for stringed instruments. The tapered shape of the Lame Sonore is symmetrical (as opposed to a saw blade), similar to a xylophone, and has a three and a half octave range, making it more suitable for classical music than the two-octave range of most musical saws.*

Annette's *Lame Sonore* is ninety-five centimeters long, designed to fit her body and arm span. The base on the lower end (equivalent to the handle of a saw) is positioned and steadied by her legs, and Annette modified the base in order to provide better cushioning and contact with her knees. Unlike playing a cello, Annette's legs are an active part of controlling the base of the *Lame Sonore*.

The handle on the top end is held in her left hand, as she would with her cello, but requires a different position of the hand and wrist, with finely controlled motion for creating the vibrato and tone of the *Lame Sonore*'s voice. Unlike the cello, the left hand is also used to bend the *Lame Sonore* downward, and in a sine-wave or S-shaped configuration as she bows across the metal edge with her right hand, adding to its unique haunting quality.



*Annette uses both hands and knees for holding and playing the Lame Sonore, while Nanke provides piano accompaniment and a discriminating ear.*

Once Annette had her own instrument, she had to teach herself to play it. A thorough search turned up only one textbook ever written on the Lame Sonore, written by Jacques Keller and published in 1950 and providing only the very basic points.

Annette learned to find pitches through bowing, position, and curvature of the metal blade. At first she bent the blade into an ‘S’ shape, determining where each pitch lay at the juncture of the forward and backward curve. Simply determining how to play the instrument was (and is) a whole exploration since there was no one to teach her, but as professional musicians both Annette’s and Nanke’s astute ears guide their journey.

Essential to the learning process was (and is) Annette’s partnership with pianist Nanke Flach. Nanke provides not only the tonal center of the piano, but a discriminating ear and in-depth feedback about tonality, function and technique as Annette taught herself to play.

*What does the Lame Sonore sound like? Like nothing you’ve ever heard. A nightingale singing during the full moon (and indeed one of their performance pieces is ‘Song of the Birds,’ by Pablo Casals), a fairy queen mourning her lost love, a celestial voice, like the voice of an angel? There’s a human but unearthly quality to the voice of the Lame Sonore, as compelling as it is impossible to describe.*



Bert Scholten, Annette's father, also provided support and encouragement. He and Annette have been playing music together since childhood, father on piano and daughter on cello, and enjoy bringing music to retirement homes. He has been one of Annette's biggest supporters as she taught herself to play the *Lame Sonore*.

Through cyberspace, Annette became acquainted with Eddo van der Hoog, a violinist with the Den Haag residence orchestra who had played the *Lame Sonore* for forty years, but had given it up. With decades of experience he proved to be an excellent source of advice and suggestions for Annette, who was committed to mastering the *Lame Sonore*.

## Playing the *Lame Sonore*

As with playing a stringed instrument, contact, pressure and communication are essential for playing the *Lame Sonore*. The primary source of sound comes from drawing the bow across the edge of the blade, but the technique differs from bowing stringed instruments in a very significant way. Instead of drawing the bow across the strings with the bow parallel to the floor, the bow is held *perpendicular* to the floor, drawing the bow vertically instead of horizontally, as you would with a cello or violin.

*Tuning: The *Lame Sonore* cannot be tuned like other instruments. Most instruments are tuned with the piano, usually with the A above middle C at 440 Hz (often at 442 Hz in orchestras). After tuning, the playing and technique are the same at 440 or 442. Since the *Lame Sonore* cannot be tuned, the player has to use different bending, bowing and use of the legs when playing at 440 as opposed to playing at 442, or at 438 Hz which is used in baroque music. This makes performance even more difficult since the playing technique now must match each specific tuning. The *Lame Sonore* player has to study the music again to be able to play it with a differently tuned instrument.*

Not only is the arm motion different with this type of bowing, the strings of the bow are no longer in constant contact with the *Lame Sonore* blade. In bowing a violin, for instance, gravity keeps the bow in contact with the strings. When the bow is held perpendicularly to the *Lame Sonore*, however, gravity may cause it to swing away from the sound-producing edge of the blade; a challenge in learning to play.

## **Performing the Lame Sonore**

Annette and Nanke started performing in local retirement homes as a Lame Sonore/piano duo in 2013, and at the Instrumentenmuseum Vosbergen in Eelde. In September 2013 they were asked to represent Würth, a large saw manufacturing company, on a culture night performance in Den Bosch. This was just the beginning and more concerts soon followed.

Their performances stimulated a whole range of responses from their audiences: surprise, delight, disbelief, even tears. Curious listeners always had questions and comments for the duo whenever they'd finished, including one man who was convinced that Annette herself must be singing, since there was no way such music could come from that piece of metal. When Annette explained that she was not singing, that it really was the Lame Sonore, he still could not be convinced and declared that she must have a hidden device somewhere on her person, playing a recording.

For two years Annette worked on different approaches and positions, but had to finalize her technique in May of 2014 in preparation for performance on an international stage. The time had come to re-introduce the Lame Sonore to the rest of the world.

## **SICILY: THE IBLA GRAND PRIZE COMPETITION**

The Ibla Grand Prize Competition takes place annually in the World Heritage Site of Ragusa Ibla, in the south of Sicily. The application information looked encouraging, as there was no age limit (unlike many music competitions) and was inclusive of pianists, singers and instrumentalists of all kinds, so it seemed the perfect venue for the Lame Sonore's international debut. Annette and Nanke decided to apply.

The Lame Sonore's uniqueness became apparent from the start. How should the instrument be classified? The instructions in English indicated that the competition would accept 'stringed instruments,' but the Italian instructions said 'bowed instruments.' Nanke contacted the office in New York for clarification, but no one had ever heard of a Lame Sonore. Could they please see the instrument being played?

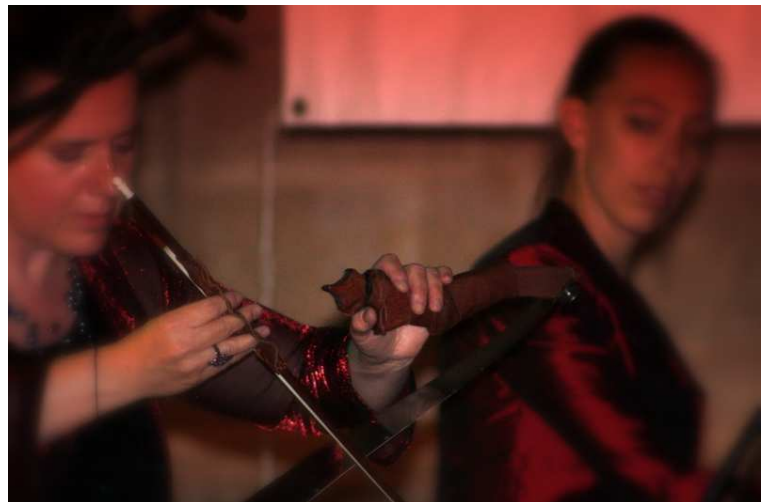
After sending a YouTube video Annette and Nanke were accepted for the competition, and packed their bags for Italy.

The medieval town of Ragusa Ibla perches atop a hill in southern Sicily, and the week-long Ibla Grand Prize competition takes place in its charming city center. Musicians arrive from all over the world and perform in churches, a theatre, in villas, an alcove off the main piazza, and on an outdoor stage with a canopy set up over two grand pianos. During the day one can hear all kinds of live music, in restaurants, piazzas, shops and churches; pianos are provided all over the town for rehearsal.

Piazza Pola, the main concert venue, comes alive every evening with Sicilian night life. Music lovers of all ages, tourists, fellow competitors, people dining at the outdoor tables, friends and family, wedding processions, dogs and children all come together as some of the world's finest musicians perform on stage. Pianists, composers, violinists, opera singers, cellos, saxophones, accordions, guitars; concerti, solo and duo performers, Mozart, Beethoven, Rachmaninov, Puccini, original works, all made their debut on the Piazza Pola stage, but the *Lame Sonore* was something new. No one had ever heard of it before.

Annette and Nanke as the *Lame Sonore*-piano duo captivated the audience from their very first performance.

Its haunting voice, like something from a forgotten dream, with the graceful piano accompaniment, captured everyone's attention. Surprise, delight, curiosity; people wanted to know more, they had questions, they tried to describe its voice, and most of all, they wanted to hear it again.



*On stage at the Piazza Pola, Ragusa Ibla, Sicily, Italy*

Most musicians in the competition are asked to play at least three times, but Annette and Nanke performed nine times in less than a week. They played on the big stage in the Piazza, they played in churches, in the Arrezzo alcove, and once they were whisked away on a moment's notice to play at a beautiful villa an hour's drive from town. Consummate professionals, they took it all in stride and embraced every opportunity to perform. At the grand finale of the competition a dozen select performers were asked to play in the concert hall of another sumptuous villa, with Annette and Nanke prominent among them, the voice of the *Lame Sonore* calling audience members from outside to crowd around the open doorways.



*Annette and Nanke perform at the competition's gala finale.*

The duo did extremely well in the competition, creating a mystical and compelling atmosphere with their well-chosen repertoire. There are very few compositions actually written for the *Lame Sonore*, and its unusual timbre and color requires care in choosing arrangements, but their selections worked very well and they ended up being listed in the Most Distinguished Musicians category with Special



Mention. Performers in this category may be asked to go on tour in the United States, and previous Ibla Grand Prize musicians have performed at Carnegie Hall.

Like a dream remembered, the *Lame Sonore* has come back. From its humble beginnings as a carpenter's tool, transformed into a musical instrument, beyond a musical saw—finally finding its place onstage in an international competition. This is just the beginning for Annette Scholten and Nanke Flach: the *Lame Sonore* is here to stay.

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Annette Scholten ([www.annettescholten.nl](http://www.annettescholten.nl)) and Nanke Flach ([www.nankeflach.nl](http://www.nankeflach.nl)) live, teach and perform in the Netherlands. Meredith Kennedy ([www.mkennedy.us](http://www.mkennedy.us)) is a soprano and freelance writer, living in Los Angeles, California. *meredithkennedy66@gmail.com*.