

A rare breed of water dog

BY VALERIE HILL
RECORD STAFF

For a house chaotic with dogs one minute, it's remarkable that moments later all is calm, with six lovely barbets lounging around in their peculiar twisted fashion, front paws to the right, hips bent to the left. The calm is soon broken as the three youngest barbets (pronounced bar-bay) plunge into a game of leapfrog, occasionally dive bombing guests and rousing a spirited game of catch the puppy.

Barbets are all about fun and lots of woolly cuddles but with only 75 of the dogs in Canada and only 30 in the U.S., this is not a breed most people have ever experienced. Paula Ballak of Bridgeport has become the breed's cheerleader.

"Good friends of ours had a red and white (setter) and I said I love the sporting dogs," said Ballak, owner of the newly launched Biscay Water Dogs kennel. "If I could find a dog similar to that . . . but I hate shedding."

A friend introduced her to the curly coated Portuguese water dog, one of the four similar nonshedding water dog breeds which includes the Spanish perro, Italian lagotto and the French barbet. In Canada, only the Portuguese and the French water dogs are recognized by the Canadian Kennel Club and starting Thursday, Dec. 27 a sampling of barbets will be part of the Elora Gorge Kennel Club's show at Bingemans in Kitchener.

After researching water dogs Ballak found a Quebec breeder and purchased her first dog, a curly black fe-



Paula Ballak with two of her barbets.

PETER LEE, RECORD STAFF

male named Bonnie, now 20 months old. Next, with the help of business partner Pam Schluter, she imported Anton, Asta and Alma, siblings originally bred in Poland and shipped to her by the breeder after much persuasion. There are, after all, less than 600 barbets in the world so the pups were special cargo.

"I had to beg for a contract," she said.

In October, Ballak travelled to Holland to pick up three more puppies: the French-born Cythere and

Cigale, which come from one of the oldest and most prestigious of the barbet lines. Both are maroon coloured, with less tightly wound curls than her other dogs, which are all woolly black with flashes of white. The third pup is four-month-old Cirocco, bred in Holland.

The puppies had ranged in price from \$1,200 to \$1,700, depending on the exchange rate of the Euro at the time, plus the expense of importing.

"I had to pay GST on the import fee and I had to go through so much

rigmarole to get them here," she said.

Then there were the breeding agreements to deal with, which gave certain rights to the original breeder, such as getting pick of the litter and dictating which stud the female will be bred to on her first mating. It's all pretty standard stuff, Ballak said, and she's happy to comply, considering the privilege of bringing these dogs to Canada.

"These are the lowest octane of the (water dog) family," she said of the laid-back barbets in terms of energy levels, though on a recent snowy day, the dogs' energy kicked up a notch. "This is the first time they've all been together (outside) and they partied like crazy."

Barbets are thought to be the oldest breed in France, originally known only as a water dog and considered the ancestor of all breeds with woolly, curly or long hair which would include everything from briards to poodles. Barbets were eventually recognized as a distinct breed with specific characteristics when it was first registered and shown in the Paris dog show, of 1863. Celebrated as highly versatile as a herding and hunting dog, family pet or agility athlete the barbet gets its name from the French word for beard. The rest of its history is spotty.

"The history of the barbet is so open to interpretation," Ballak said. "Where do you get accurate information, it's such an old breed?"

A medium-sized dog, the barbets are born with looser coats

BEST IN SHOW

Elora Gorge Kennel Club's annual show features more than 100 breeds daily, Thursday, Dec. 27 to Saturday, Dec. 29 at Bingemans Convention Centre (Marshall Hall).

■ Judging from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

■ Admission: Adults \$4, seniors \$3, children \$2, family \$10

■ For a list of events and judging schedule, visit www.eloragorgekennelclub.com

■ Biscay Water Dogs' website (under construction) is www.biscaywaterdogs.com

which can be trained into cords as they mature. Colours vary from black to fawn to piebald, a mix of black and white. The dog was officially recognized by the Canadian Kennel Club in March 2006 after a lengthy application process, though in the U.S. Barbets are considered foundation stock only, which means the breed will not be recognized by the American Kennel Club until the population reaches 150.

Ballak hopes to have puppies ready for sale by next spring, but building a viable kennel will take several years, she said, noting that most of the barbets in Canada are in Quebec and there is a large barbet club in Switzerland. For the time being, she's just trumpeting the special features of this unique breed.

"We're not just selling dogs, we're educating people," Ballak said.

vhill@therecord.com



Mark Veenman is the owner of Apollo Piano, a Hawkesville company named for the Greek god of music.

PHILIP WALKER, RECORD STAFF

Tuning: Work a labour of love

CONTINUED FROM PAGE W1

He places his laptop computer on the cast-iron framework inside the belly of the piano and fires up a program called Reyburn CyberTuner. A green, rotating bull's-eye shimmies left or right across the screen each time Veenman hits a note; left indicates the note is flat, right means sharp.

The computer measures differences in pitch as small as 1/1000th of a semitone — "beyond the realm of human consciousness," Veenman says.

Such minute differences are imperceptible when notes are played alone, but an accomplished pianist does not play notes in isolation.

When a trained pianist plays a complicated piece — as Veenman does at the conclusion of every job — it is the overall sound of the music that matters. Just like a car won't run properly if a small but crucial part is missing, beautiful piano music relies on the balanced interplay of the instrument's many parts.

Top musicians know this instinctively, even if they don't have the foggiest idea about acoustic physics.

That's why Veenman has been commissioned by performers like Loreena McKennitt and Natalie McMaster to hone their pianos before concerts, and why The Beckett School in Kitchener entrusts him with tuning its two-dozen pianos.

For Veenman, the work is a labour of love. He has been fascinated by the piano since he begged his parents for lessons at age six (they also signed him up for drum lessons, which he hated).

His formal education is in languages, so he learned his craft as an apprentice

under local technician Marg Elmslie and bought her business when she relocated to cottage country.

Everything about the piano — its proportions, its tones, its possibilities — inspired Veenman, and still does.

On this morning, he is experimenting with a historical tuning called a Kirnberger temperament, named for 18th-century British musician and theorist Johann Philipp Kirnberger.

Once a student of Johann Sebastian Bach, Kirnberger developed tuning systems that, in theory, better captured the intended sounds of pieces composed by Bach and his contemporaries.

The note E in a Kirnberger temperament, for example, is 6/100ths of a semitone flat of an E in a typical tuning — a tiny but important distinction, Veenman says.

But it's also a subject Veenman will have to ponder another time, since the chapel owners did not hire him to do a Kirnberger temperament. Rather, they want the most common and universally applicable tuning, known as equal temperament.

Nearly all of Veenman's clients ask for equal temperament — it's the piano equivalent of a seasonal tune-up for a car, though the comparison is crude.

Essentially, equal temperament allows most pianists to sound good on most pianos most of the time.

So Veenman begins the tuning again, undoing the Kirnberger adjustments and putting the piano into equal temperament, one note at a time.

He must still listen for the overtones, the sounds-within-sounds that emerge according to the complicated laws of

acoustic physics.

He uses the computer, but does not rely on it. After all, the computer is only listening for the tones he programmed into it, specific to this model of piano.

"I've trained the computer, but it's not a substitute," he says.

He eventually shuts down the computer and verifies his work with his ears and the oldest tool of his trade, a tuning fork. He checks and rechecks note by note, chord by chord.

Then, without segue, Veenman launches into a lively and dynamic concerto, his fingers dancing along nearly all of the 88 keys, his feet working the pedals.

It's an excerpt from Concerto Opus 7 No. 4 by British composer William Felton, and Veenman plays it without sheet music. During slower moments, he watches the interplay of hammers and strings inside the piano.

The performance lasts barely two minutes, and Veenman rests his hands on his lap and grins.

"That's a charming piece that's very representative of keyboard music of its era," he says. "It allows me to test the work that I've done."

He plays a different piece after nearly every tuning, though it's often a baroque piece — hardly surprising for a guy whose license plate reads J BACH.

Performing at the end of every tuning reminds Veenman that a perfectly tuned piano is only a collection of wood and steel until a musician brings it to life.

"That's the moment of bliss, when the sounds are created," he says. "It's the final step, and it's magical."
chunter@therecord.com



DEAR
ELLIE

Head directly to a therapist

Q: I'm 42, married with two young teenage daughters, and have fallen in love with another man I've known for eight months.

1) Do I stay with my husband, who's kind and devoted but about whom I've always felt it wasn't the right choice? And do it because of our children, and because it'll devastate him and also make both our lives financially much more difficult? Hurting him will hurt me too; he's a part of me.

Or 2) Do I separate for a man who enhances every part of my life? How do I choose? I don't want to go to counselling. I've been with my husband since age 15 so we both know each other thoroughly. And what's fair to this new man in my life who's never married? Should he wait around for months, or years? Background: I've been cheating on and off for five years, with others, more casually. My husband forgave me, I went on mild antidepressants as he suggested. Recently, I confessed there was someone else. He doesn't want me to leave.

A: Though you think you know everything you need to know about your husband, it's obvious you don't know yourself. You've been risking a breakup for years, just for casual flings. You resist counselling, yet — if you don't want to wake up one day with huge regrets for whatever choice you make — you're in critical need of individual therapy. Only a professional therapist can help you gain insight to what's driven you, and what you're really seeking. After all, if it's attention you crave, you'll likely cheat on this next guy too, unless you change.

The choice you need to make is not about these two men, but about who you really are. Meanwhile, your teenagers are picking up all kinds of signals from you, from your indecision, your flirtations, your attitudes toward their Dad. Get to counselling right away.

NUDE PHOTOS ARE DRIVING HIM CRAZY

Q: I'm having a hard time accepting the existence of some tastefully done, but nude photos of my girlfriend of several years. These were done 10 years ago, for her then-boyfriend but now ex-husband.

When they separated, he wanted to take the pictures with him, which I believe she allowed, although she denies it. Since they weren't done for me, they make me jealous and the thought of the photos being enjoyed by her ex-husband drives me crazy.

Should I just forget about them; is this a normal response or am I being unreasonable? I wish she'd retrieve them and keep them locked up. We're in our late-20s and she was just 18 when they were done.

A: Ask for what you wish . . . tell her how bothered you feel and what you want her to do. Since you don't fully believe her story, I suspect it's your own insecurity that's causing this jealous reaction to something that had nothing to do with you at the time.

Her reaction to your request may spark the conversation you two need to have: How committed is she to you, does she care that you feel so upset about the photos, will she even try to get them back? Those are the answers you need, to put this behind you. In fact, she may not be able to retrieve the pictures, but if she can reassure you of your place in her life and that she tried to get them to comfort you, you'll feel better.

• E-mail Ellie: ellie@therecord.com



BILL BEAN
WILL RETURN