

Preview: Oberlin Baroque Performance Institute features "Italian Music from Monteverdi to Tartini"

Published June 21, 2010

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Baroque Performance Institute co-founders Catharina Meints and her husband, the late James Caldwell first met while playing in the Chamber Symphony of Philadelphia, and it was Caldwell, an oboist, who introduced Meints, a cellist, to the

Viola de Gamba. "Even as an oboist, he had taught himself to play. He had bought a number of instruments so that he could lend them to people that he wanted to encourage to play with him. Literally on our very first date he was showing me his gambas. So he taught me how to play, and then we started going to Switzerland to study with August Wenzinger", Catharina Meints recalled in a phone conversation last week.

When Meints and Caldwell first moved to Northeast Ohio in 1971, he to become professor of oboe at the Oberlin Conservatory, and she to join the cello section of the Cleveland Orchestra, they immediately saw an opportunity. "Jim and I had both been studying viola de gamba with August Wenzinger in Switzerland, and when we saw the facilities at Oberlin we both thought that this would be the place to have a summer workshop, and bring him over to run it. At that point there were not any historical performance workshops that included a number of instruments. There were a number of workshops for a single instrument, but our idea was that we would have faculty for three or four different instruments. This would allow people to play together. The Dean of the Conservatory at that time, Emil Dannenberg, was very interested and supportive of the idea. So even though we had just arrived in 1971, by 1972 the first Oberlin Baroque Performance Institute happened. "

Today the 39th edition of the Baroque Performance Institute begins in Oberlin, and runs through the 4th of July. This year's theme is "Mu-

sic in Italy, from Monteverdi to Tartini", and will feature a complete performance of Monteverdi's 1610 "Vespers" on Friday the 25th of June. A concert of Italian concerti and orchestral works will be presented on Friday the 3rd of July. (Please see CC.com's calendar listings page for more information about BPI performances.)

This year BPI will once again have a distinguished faculty of twenty-four internationally renowned teachers who will offer daily lessons, master classes and coachings in baroque violin, viola, cello, viola de gamba, recorder, flute, oboe, bassoon, trumpet, cornetto, harpsichord, organ, clavichord, piano, and voice, as well as classes in continuo playing and baroque dance. This year's artistic director is Kenneth Slowik. Past directors have included Gustav Leonhardt, Christopher Hogwood, and Nicolas McGegan.

From the beginning, BPI has been at the forefront of the historical performance practice movement in North America. Its list of former students reads like a Who's Who of the Early Music world. "I would say that the core of the people who attend are professional musicians, who have never played a baroque instrument before and they learn how to do it. It is great to watch, because they just dive right in".

But the Institute is also open to any player, professional or avocational, who wants to learn a baroque instrument. As Meints says, "That is one thing that we are very proud of. Almost everyone on the faculty has been there many years, and they really know how to deal with musicians at all levels. To a certain extent there is a self-selection of people who come, because we do have a reputation of being at a relatively high level. So people who come can read music and know something about playing in an ensemble. They can of course be beginners on the Baroque instruments, but they don't need to be professional musicians. Both in the master classes and in the ensembles, we know how to deal with people at different levels. We try to make everybody comfortable".

One measure of the appeal of BPI is that so

many students return. Meints notes, “A couple of our students have come annually for thirty years, but we also get a huge number of people coming back year after year, which is wonderful. We think that means they are really enjoying themselves. They are always so grateful. The fact that we really have had such a big influence on the early music scene in America, and the number of people who have said to me that BPI changed their life is kind of amazing”.



One example of BPI’s having changed someone’s life is Oberlin harpsichord professor and BPI faculty member Webb Wiggins, who didn’t like early music at all until he went to college.

“Growing up in a small town in Georgia, I basically knew very little about early music. When I was study-

ing piano and a little bit of organ before I went to college, I hated Bach. But the first week in college, I became an organ major, which turned out to be one of the best moves of my life. I played on tracker organs and had a very savvy teacher, and this is when I realized that I really love this music.”

Wiggins’ college acquired a harpsichord, and he accompanied another student on a recital. Five years later, he seized the opportunity to buy a little instrument. “I called a friend from undergraduate school and said, where can I go to learn something more about the harpsichord? And, she said, well, I would recommend the Baroque Performance Institute at Oberlin. Then she said, I’m going so why don’t we go together, and I did, and wow.

“When I attended my first BPI it was a revelation. Back then I wouldn’t have the words to describe how I felt about the music. Now I would say it is the rhythmic integrity and the dance aspect to the music. This and the unforced sound of the instruments really intrigued me. When I returned home, I knew that I really needed to get a good harpsichord. So I did, and in fact it is the instrument that I now have in my studio. I have to say that I have never been so turned on to anything as much

as I was to the whole process of performance practice.

Wiggins has very good reasons to encourage players of modern instruments to take advantage of BPI. “We are trying, as much as we can, to play the music with an ear toward what the composer intended. Even if students are going back to play modern piano for the rest of their lives, they can still have a concept. I have had pianists who have attended, who don’t even own harpsichords, write to say that being at BPI has made their playing better. I do think that the BPI experience will make you a better musician”.



Another example of how BPI has affected future careers is that of Bruce Dickey, who returns to the BPI faculty to teach and perform this summer. Dickey has been largely responsible for the modern revival

of the cornetto, one of the most fascinating instruments in the Renaissance and Baroque instrumentarium. We interviewed him over coffee last December when he was in Cleveland to play the Praetorius Christmas Vespers with Apollo’s Fire.

Daniel Hathaway: What was your first encounter with the cornetto?

Bruce Dickey: I was an undergraduate at Indiana University when I discovered the recorder and I discovered a group there that was playing recorders, shawms, krummhorns. One of the other players in the group was Michael Lynn, who’s now at Oberlin -- we were two members of the wind component of that ensemble, and we were sitting one day in the rehearsal room with all the instruments hanging in a cupboard, and he pointed at the cornetto and said “that’s your instrument”. And I said, “No, no, no.” I was a trumpet student at the time and I looked at that mouthpiece and said, “I don’t want to do that”. It took a couple of years before I came around. I did play a few pieces on the cornetto. I shudder to think that there are probably still tapes lurking in the music library there. And then I went off to Basel to study the recorder and I ordered a plastic cornetto from Christopher Monk and took it with me to Basel and started to take some lessons from Edward

Tarr.

DH: I didn't know he ever taught cornetto.

BD: Yes, he did. It was in that period when the cornetto players were still trumpet players, mostly playing on big, trumpet-type mouthpieces. So I started taking a few lessons on the cornetto and then -- this story has gotten told many times -- I fell playing touch football with a couple of Czech theology students. I broke my wrist and had a cast put on my arm and I couldn't play the recorder. I was sitting there in desperation because I had saved money for two years to go study the recorder, and I couldn't play it. So I looked up on the wall where my cornetto was hanging and I thought, hmm, it only has six holes and it's curved. I wonder if I could manage to cover the holes? I discovered that by propping up the end of the cornetto on my knee and putting it half on a table, I could just cover the holes. All I did for two months was practice on it, and I didn't have much success. Then they took the cast off and I came back and took the cornetto in my hands.

One of the most difficult things about learning the cornetto is figuring out how to hold on to the thing so it doesn't feel like it's falling on the ground. It's curved so the balance is a little bit funny. Suddenly it just felt absolutely easy. I started practicing and it really was remarkable, I'd never experienced anything like it, where each day I could play something I couldn't play the day before. Week after week I was moving forward and after a couple of months I was playing difficult music I never dreamed I could play. Within six months, Ed [Tarr] had retired and he wanted me to take over the cornetto class, so I was given a job teaching the cornetto, and about six months later Jordi Savall heard me playing and asked me if I would play in Hesperion XX. (laughter) It was an amazing period.

DH: By then you had acquired a better instrument?

BD: I had. Another curious thing -- there weren't that many cornetto players in those days, and I was asked to teach recorder in a course in France -- Saintes, it was in this abbey that has been beautifully restored. In those days there were no doors on the rooms and I was sitting in this little cell in the monastery practicing my cornetto, and this man knocked on the non-door and said in French, "Who

are you? I'm Jean-Pierre Canihac, and I'm the cornetto teacher here and you play as well as I do". So we became friends and played together every day -- and neither one of us had ever had someone else to play with. So we got to know each other, and when Jordi asked me to play in Hesperion XX I asked Jean-Pierre to play cornetto, so we got to play in that group together.

DH: Was Concerto Castello formed early in your career?

BD: That happened maybe three years later, partly because when I put together this group for Jordi I needed three trombones. I met Charles Toet in Amsterdam in a concert so I asked him, we became friends, and I knew Alice Robbins, Francie Fitch and Dana Maiben, mostly from the Oberlin Baroque Performance Institute. Though I was playing in groups at Indiana, there really weren't any teachers, so I went two summers to the BPI, and made my contacts in Basel, where I had my first real experiences with baroque music.

DH: How did Concerto Palatino come about?

BD: When Charles and I decided that having a trans-Atlantic group was too complicated -- the group had two European-based men and three North American-based women -- we decided we needed a group in Europe. We didn't want to get a brass group, a cornetto and sackbut ensemble again, so basically we needed a name for whatever it was that we were doing at the time, which usually involved cornetts and sackbuts but also strings. So we played concerts under various names. Then I moved to Bologna and I started reading about this group, Concerto Palatino, the historical one, and I thought that would be a good name, and discovered that there had been a group with that name -- a modern group -- and I had a friend who had played in that group. I did contact them and they told me they had no interest in keeping the name and if we wanted it was ours. Since I was living in Bologna, I thought that was a nice name. Over the years when standards on the cornetto and sackbut got better and better, we began focusing more on two cornetti and three sackbuts as the core of the group.

DH: What did the original Concerto Palatino do?

Were they the town band for Bologna?

BD: They were. They had very specific things to do. There were four cornetti, four trombones, and under the umbrella of the Concerto Palatino there were also two lute players, a harp and a trumpet. The cornettos and sackbuts played twice a day in the main square, the Piazza Maggiore, from a balcony. First, eight trumpet players came out and played a fanfare, then they went out into the Palazza and the cornetti and sackbuts came out and played a motet. This happened from around 1635 to 1770 or so. They also played in the Mass in San Petronio, and they played whenever the Signoria went out of the Palazza — they played at the bottom of the stairs to announce her departure. It's very interesting that in about 1767 there was a meeting of the city fathers to discuss the "manifest scandal" that takes place every day when Concerto Palatino plays from the balcony. They said that the cornetto, being practically out of use and it being difficult to find young people today who want to take it up, was creating a huge scandal, so they voted to replace the cornetto and sackbut group with a sort of Napoleonic military band with a piccolo and a bass drum.

DH: How old is the cornetto as an instrument?

BD: The ancestors were animal horns first without and then with finger holes. Those instruments were used throughout the middle ages and acquired finger holes from about 1100, but they weren't really in the forefront of music making, they were mainly folkish. Later they started making these instruments out of wood or ivory and they could create them in a way that they would overblow so they could play at the octave or fully chromatically. This happened right around 1490, when cornetto players start appearing in drawings and begin to come in very quickly to the wind bands in Italy and replacing the shawms. In the space of three decades or so, the wind bands were revolutionized from being these shawm, slide trumpet, alta cappella bands to being bands of cornettos and sackbuts. I think what happened was that South German cornetto makers figured out how to make these instruments straight out of wood, because all of the illustrations from the end of the sixteenth century show cornetto players playing straight wooden instruments. A lot of these players went off to Italy and were playing in Fer-

rara and Florence and Padova in wind bands, and not long after that in Italy you start seeing curved cornetti. I think that Italian makers saw these straight instruments and said, Oh, that's good, but they're not very attractive and they have nothing to do with the tradition and symbolism of curved animal horns that are associated with the imagery of last judgment and the whole liturgical connection. So they started to make these straight instruments and learned how to transfer them to curved. This is my theory, because by 1520, you begin to see these curved instruments regularly in Italy, and a little bit later in Germany.

DH: Were these octagonal instruments?

BD: For the most part, yes. There are 310 surviving cornetti in museums — I've just been working on a catalog which is why I know that! About 60 of those are straight, and of the curved ones, I'd guess that about 90 percent have the octagonal design. It's very interesting because of something I've been busy with just in the last month. It appears that the earliest instruments were round. There are some in Brussels and there is a whole set of them in Rome. The reason I've been working on this is that the museum there is a disaster. They have these instruments in glass cases so nobody can get to them. Most of the identifying tags are upside down so you can't see the numbers, which is pretty disastrous because [what we all want to know is] what are the earliest cornetti like, and these instruments are the ones [that can answer that question]. You can't get to them, you can't measure them, or play them. I think those instruments will answer a lot of questions about those transitional instruments. After the first half of the sixteenth century, curved instruments almost always took the octagonal shape. Very often they had a diamond pattern at the top. Don Smithers has a theory that the diamond pattern is tied to the black color and to the serpentine nature of the whole cornetto family, which resemble a lizard. Not a serpent yet — the serpent is really not technically a cornetto, but the bass cornetti were S-shaped, many times had serpent's heads on them and he ties that into the symbolism of original sin, death and the underworld (Monteverdi put cornetti in the underworld). Smithers also had some kind of numerology theory involving eight sides.

DH: How many instruments do you own?

BD: A lot of very bad instruments (laughter). I always wondered how many instruments you needed to form a complete circle. When my students were all in Bologna, I took my cornetti and put them in a circle [shows a photo on his laptop of fourteen instruments laid end to end, and a student lying inside like Leonardo da Vinci's man in a square in a circle]. I have recently discovered that we have termites in the beams of the room where I keep the instruments, so I had to move all my instruments out of the cupboard, so here's a bag of cornetti [shows picture]. People always ask me, what's the collective noun for cornetti? I have a book from 1910 where a man writes with enormous authority — I don't know where he gets his information — that a group of cornetti was called a nest of cornetti.

DH: Do you own any antique ones?

BD: No. I've seen a few come on the market. The last one sold for something like 160,000 Deutsch Marks, maybe a thousand Euros. You can't play them because they would probably crack.

DH: Who's making instruments at the moment?

BD: Well, there are about four good makers, the best of which is a fellow in Montreal, Matt Jennejohn. He's an oboist and a cornetto player, and he started making cornetti about three years ago and they're fantastic.

DH: Have you seen one being made?

BD: Yes. You start off with a piece of wood cut to the thickness of the largest part of the diameter, and you saw it in half lengthwise, then you cut the curve then you gouge out each half using a series of bits to show the dimensions. Glue it together, cut the octagonal angles, and cover it with leather or parchment. And you put the finger holes in at some point.

DH: So it's not bent.

BD: Italian instruments were never bent. Some German ones were turned on a lathe then steam bent. But Italian instruments were always carved.

DH: Well, it's a fabulous sound and blends so well with voices.

BD: We don't really know what it sounded like. Obviously we have no recordings. We don't really have any mouthpieces. Of the existing mouthpieces that arguably could be original, I doubt that any of them are as early as the early 17th century. Of the surviving twelve only six could possibly be original. All six of them are totally different, in dimensions and depth and the shape of the cup. So you can't start from the equipment and say oh, that's what the instrument sounded like. You can start from an idea of what the instrument sounded like and try to find equipment that seems reasonable and will allow you to achieve that goal.

DH: Sounds like trying to recreate an historical shawm.

BD: The pieces of information that can really give you the idea of the sound are the context in which the instrument has to work. It has to play with trombone. That doesn't mean that the instrument has to sound like the trombone, but it has to work with the trombone. It has to work with the violin, because it was meant to play with the violin, it has to work with the organ, to be loud enough and to have something of the color of the organ, and it has to sound as much as possible like the voice. From playing in all those contexts you have the idea that it has to be rather bright, "a ray of sunshine in the shadows of a cathedral".

DH: It would be interesting to find someone who's willing to explore the possibilities.

BD: There was an ensemble, Tragicomedia, that was doing a project of contemporary music. At the same time I was rehearsing with them for a solo concert, and one of the composers was John Paul Jones, the bass guitarist for Led Zeppelin. He was there at this rehearsal and said "I've been writing this piece for years and I didn't know what instrument it was for. Now I know what instrument it should be, and I'd like to talk to you more about the cornetto". He actually came to Bologna and stayed with me for three days to listen to recordings and listen to me play, talk about the instrument, talk about Led Zeppelin. Then he invited me to his farm

in Bath where he had turned a barn into sort of a recording studio and I spent a couple of days there drinking whiskey and making a demo recording of this piece with him playing synthesizer and me playing cornetto. And he'd ask me questions like, which orchestra would you prefer to play with? And I asked him, is this a recording you think you'll be able to sell? And he said, I'm not interested in making recordings that will not sell in great numbers. Anyway, we made this thing, and I heard a report later from a friend, who works at EMI, and they saw him there one day trying to sell this project and it never got off the ground. I never heard from him again.

DH: In addition to Concerto Palatino, what other groups do you appear with on a regular basis?

BD: The groups I collaborate with regularly are Cantus Cölln with Konrad Junghänel and with Philippe Herreweghe and Collegium Vocale, and we play frequently with Ton Koopman under the flag of the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra. And I do many

solo recitals with cornetti and organ or two cornetti and two organs.

DH: It's a busy life. How were we lucky enough to get you here in Cleveland for a week?

BD: I'm always looking for opportunities to come back to the states because I can go visit my mother. I also have a brother in Seattle.

DH: Any funny stories to share?

BD: Once in the States, Michel Piguet and I and some other musicians were being interviewed on a Midwestern radio station. The host said, "I hear that you play Renaissance Music. How is that different from Country Western?" There were three of us Americans in the group, and we all looked at Michel Piguet and thought, Oh my God, how's he going to answer that? But he was absolutely brilliant. "We do play zis western music but not from zis country".