

## Baroque Performance Institute launches its 44th season

by Jeremy Reynolds



At the end of the 17th century, disparity between the French and Italian baroque styles had reached its peak, and intrigue abounded in the Parisian music world. One daring composer, François Couperin (1668 – 1733), hid a secret passion from his family and his country — an unrequited love for the music of Arcangelo Corelli (1653 – 1713).

Although the French court kept a stifling hold over the musical scene, banning anything other than the French style from public performance, Couperin rebelled against this dictate. He composed — in secret — a collection of trio sonatas (1695) imitating the style of Corelli. He told the court that he had been sent these sonatas from a cousin, Couperoni, an Italianization of his own name. And under this furtive pseudonym, he introduced a hybridization of the two national styles, winning great acclaim for his “discovery” of his cousin’s work.

This antagonistic period is the focus for the 44th season of the annual Baroque Performance Institute (BPI) at the Oberlin Conservatory, which runs from Sunday, June 21 through Saturday, July 4. This year’s program, entitled *Circa 1690: prelude to a new century*, highlights the disparate elements of French and Italian baroque music pre-Bach through a series of instrumental and vocal master classes, chamber music and large ensemble recitals, and a regular lecture series.

Baroque performance has flourished in the United States as a professional field, particularly within the past decade, but when BPI was founded in 1971, it was the first festival of its kind. We reached founding faculty member Catharina Meints (pictured left with the late James Caldwell) by telephone to discuss the theme for the program, and how BPI has transformed since its inception.

“The title was — I believe — my idea, and I’m very excited about it,” Meints said. “Corelli’s first trio sonatas were composed right in the middle of that period. Domenico Gabrielli (1651 – 1690) published the first solo cello music in Italy around 1690. Dieterich Buxtehude (circa 1637 – 1707) wrote the famous cantata *Jubilate Domino* around 1690. Johannes Schenk (1660 – circa 1712), a famous gamba composer, wrote his First Book in 1690s. So you have all of these composers starting out in the same years, but some of their music sounds like it came from the moon compared to the others! The Italian and French styles were so different then, and 1690 is where you see that the most.

“By the time you get to 1700, Couperin was writing Italian music, and Marin Marais (1656 – 1728) was starting to write in Italian styles,” Meints continued. “But 1690 is when they were the most distinct from one another. And the English are there too – Purcell was sort of imitating the French, but still sounding quite English in the middle of all of this change. Marais wrote a Ground, and a ground is a completely English genre. What on earth was a Frenchman doing writing a ground? (laughs) Its fascinating!”

How will this theme be incorporated into the daily schedule of BPI? “We always try to have the student ensembles reflect the theme,” said Meints. “I’m hoping that in the master classes and ensemble rehearsals, they will recognize these huge differences between the French and Italian styles. And then, that they will value the change when the composers started combining these styles in the 18th centuries.”

Meints has been involved with the festival since she helped to founded it with her late husband, James Caldwell. How has the institute changed over the past 43 years? “BPI has changed surprisingly little,” Meints, recalled. “Our first goals were to help people make the transition between modern and baroque instruments so they would learn how to play in the baroque style, and to pursue an immersion in baroque music. And that’s the same thing we do now. We usually attract 90 and 100 people, and they’re all very eager to learn everything they possibly can.

“One difference is that there are a lot more people running their own institutes,” Meints continued. “We’ve found that our niche is introducing people to the instruments, and, in my estimation, we do that very well. So we mostly get people who don’t have experience playing baroque instruments. Of course, they come back year after year, and they get better.”

Does BPI interact with any of the newer institutes? “We certainly discuss dates with them so we don’t overlap,” said Meints. “Boston Early Music Festival is one that we can’t share dates with. Our faculty is full involved with it and our student base is often similar. We generally take the last two weeks in June — actually, the reason for that is because that’s when I had vacation from the Cleveland Orchestra back when we started!”

The schedule for BPI attendees has also changed little over the past few decades, though the program now extends only two weeks as opposed to the original three. What does a typical day look like?

“Everyone has the same basic schedule,” Meints said. “The morning is devoted to master classes for each instrument. Each master class is run differently according to which faculty member is teaching, of course, but the morning is always set aside for master classes. The early afternoon is a time for lectures on the theme or special concerts, and later in the afternoon everybody is coached in an ensemble of four to six people by one of the faculty.”

After all of the rehearsing and individual coaching, performance opportunities abound. “Most of the ensembles, about 95%, will perform on Saturday afternoon for the first week (June 27 this year),” Meints said. “The beauty of BPI lies in that even those people who have never even touched a Baroque instrument will pick it up on Monday and perform for the first time on Saturday. It’s a very fast learning curve, and everyone will generally be happy and feel a sense of accomplishment with what they’ve done.”

How are the ensembles formed? “One of the faculty’s hardest jobs during the week is to put together people with the same level of experience together,” said Meints. “Something I personally love about BPI is that we have a wide range of ages as well as backgrounds — we look at their experience with their instruments as opposed to their age. One of my favorite ensembles recently was comprised of a high school student, a mid-career professional violinist in his 40s, a 70-year-old keyboard player, and a 65-year-old gamba player. They had such a great time! Socially, it’s always a very interesting mix of people. We don’t have auditions, and nobody has to send a tape, but everyone knows they’re going to have to work very hard.”

With back-to-back workshops, lectures, and rehearsals, there isn’t much time for attendees to mix outside of program activities, something that Meints claims is an unfortunate reality of BPI’s intense scheduling.

“BPI gets criticized sometimes for not planning as many social activities as other workshops,” she said. “We have found that that’s one of the things people suggest we should work on, but it’s so difficult because we don’t have time! We’d have to remove something from the schedule to make time, and no one wants that either. In the students’ evaluations at the end of the program, about 10% say that the thing that they want the most is a 26 hour day.”

The second faculty concert on Friday, June 3 will be in Carnegie Library. Why the change of venue from Warner? “Scheduling conflict,” Meints explained. “We’ve done this once or twice before when Warner was unavailable. Carnegie is air-conditioned.

Finney Chapel is not air-conditioned. I think the second year of BPI, we had a big concert in Finney and the performers just died. Want to know what hasn't changed? Finney is still not air-conditioned! I don't think we've played there since.”

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