

Oberlin Baroque Performance Institute: Week Two, Day Three (Wednesday, June 28)

by Daniel Hathaway



When I went into this two-week immersion, I thought I'd pursue all the daily activities of a harpsichord student and then toss off an article about the experience every evening. Silly me. That plan evaporated the day I realized that I'd left my room before 8 am and hadn't returned until after ten in the evening. BPI keeps you busy all day! I'll stick to the article-a-day schedule, but there's some catchup writing to be done.

On Wednesday, the harpsichord master classes split into two concurrent sessions, one led by Lisa Crawford, the other (mine) by Mark Edwards. After hearing the C-minor Prelude from *The Well-Tempered Clavier Book One* (advice: use wrist rotation to mirror the texture of the music; differentiate between speaking and

singing) and Antoine Forqueray's *La Montigni* (originally a viol piece, so prioritize how to play the notes in the bass line; to avoid "claw hand," let the hands free fall onto the keyboard from overhead height), I was up next with a rather bizarre piece by an English virginalist.

In Nomine.

JOHN BULL.



One of John Bull's *In Nomines* from the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book* is in 11/4 time, a meter described in a lecture to London's Musical Association in 1895 as "two bars of common time and one of 3/4 time, the effect not being so annoying to the rhythmic sense as might be imagined."

Though Edwards was less familiar with the work, he was quick to point out some tips about playing a polyphonic piece on the harpsichord: emphasizing the entry of new voices; spreading chords — even two-noters — at different speeds for expressive emphasis; achieving accents through choice of fingering.

Because there are a number of places in the piece where accidentals are questionable or ambiguous, Edwards emphasized the importance of using a good edition. Was this piece included in *Musica Britannica* as well as in the less-reliable but readily available Fitzwilliam edition? I confessed that I went looking for "MB" but that collection lives on the second floor of the Conservatory Library in the moveable stack area — you have to go through several arcane moves to unlock and crank successive rows of books to gain access to what you want. (I'm not the only one who, frustrated, gave up his quest.)



My colleague Brendan Barker happened to mention that the harpsichord master classes seemed to be designed for performers who were contemplating a solo career on the instrument — which he was not. I sat down with him to ask about his own reasons for attending BPI.



"I did graduate work at Notre Dame with a bunch of great professors, but especially Alex Blachley and Mary Anne Ballard — she's integrally involved here with the viola da gamba, but she's also a big advocate for the program. I found out from my friends who have come to BPI in

past years how awesome it was, and I wanted to spend some time intensively studying continuo. I could never see myself as a harpsichord soloist, but I'd play continuo in a heartbeat. I've always been interested in the image of the conductor as keyboardist leading an ensemble from within.

"I always tell people that I'm a conductor by vocation, and an organist by necessity," the Philadelphia native said, referring to his current position as full-time music director at a large Roman Catholic parish outside Pittsburgh. There, he conducts a 30-voice choir ("If everybody shows up") and plays a hybrid pipe/electronic organ. Barker originally thought he wanted to be a marching band director. "I studied the tuba as an undergraduate at Duquesne but ended up hating it. I started singing in choir, and that really changed everything."

Barker had met Joe Gascho during a short master class at Notre Dame, and was eager to pursue continuo playing with him at BPI. "He's fantastic to work with. He makes such a painful subject approachable and entertaining. I put his continuo classes down as my favorite on the student survey."



What's Gascho's secret? "I think he encourages us not to view continuo playing as something so mystical, and he tells us not to overthink things or try to be too flashy right off the bat. You hear concerts where people are playing fantastic continuo and you think, 'I could never do that.' But if you begin slowly and figure out how to play the bass

line and add a chord every two measures, the process becomes systematic, approachable, and much less terrifying."

During the first week, Barker was in an ensemble that included two harpsichordists. "That was very helpful to me because it was my first experience ever playing continuo. With two players, you can create more texture, and it's less stressful when you have more people to share the responsibility. My partner was more skilled — she just finished a degree in harpsichord at Eastman — so

she was the leader, and I was just figuring out the chords and adding things as I was able. I jokingly referred to myself as the ‘ripieno’ harpsichordist who joined in the *tuttis* in order to produce a larger, more varied texture.”

The 2:00 pm student concerts on Wednesday and Thursday continued the first week’s parade of Telemann fantasias for solo instruments. It’s been ear-opening to hear so many of his one-liners in a short space of time. One of the most prolific composers of all time, Telemann is endlessly inventive in these pieces — which street musicians and subway buskers might well adopt to improve their game.

Before our 3:00 pm ensemble coaching, I got together with my harpsichord henchperson, Michael Mishler, to plot our moves in the Mouret suite. I suggested following Brendon Barker’s lead and functioning as the ‘ripieno’ player, adding emphasis to passages where the trumpet played. During the coaching session, John Thiessen patiently and painstakingly worked us through details of ensemble, rhythm, and dynamics, and Joe Gascho dropped in to suggest fancying up the ‘ripieno’ harpsichord part. “What’s the only chord in the first movement that isn’t either a D or A chord?” “A G chord.” “Well, make something big out of that.” And “Why play such a skinny chord here?” “The bass note is D above the staff, so there’s not much headroom.” “So play it down two octaves and make a big deal out of rolling the chord.” “I’m allowed to do that?”



Gaschoisms were rife in the evening continuo class, which Joe had invited other continuo instrumentalists to join. A motley assortment of instruments gathered in C25 — gambas, cellos, a guitar, a bassoon, a theorbo — to give the

keyboardists practice at playing well with others. The exercises included keyboardists and instrumentalists sharing benches back-to-back to communicate physically while playing — first using randomly rhythmicized scales, then with proper bass lines. The most difficult part was not falling off your bench.



Published on ClevelandClassical.com July 3, 2017.

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