

Oberlin Baroque Performance Institute marks anniversaries of Couperin & Charpentier

by Daniel Hathaway



“We’ve always treated French music as something very special,” Kenneth Slowik, artistic director of the Oberlin Baroque Performance Institute, said in a telephone conversation. “It’s one of the two reigning styles in Baroque music that we have to come back to on a regular basis.”

BPI originally rotated annually between studies of the four main national schools of Baroque performance practice — English, German, Italian, and French — but now organizes its summer institutes more thematically. Currently in the second and final week of its 47th season, the BPI faculty is busy teaching the finer points of French Baroque style to 101 students of all ages and levels of accomplishment. “We try to instill in our students some sense of how we do what we do — and why — through teaching, lectures, and by example,” Slowik said.



Before they can assign those students to the weekly chamber groups in which much of the teaching takes place, the faculty have an immense puzzle to put together. “It’s always mysterious who’s going to show up,” Slowik said. “This year we have a raft of bassoonists. Some years we’re light in the flute department and some years it’s overflowing.” Armed with their vast knowledge of the repertoire and the extensive resources of the Conservatory Library, the faculty somehow decide each Monday morning on the musical teams that will play in a marathon concert the following Saturday from 1:00 to 6:00 pm in Kulas Recital Hall. *(Left: the puzzle as solved one week last summer.)*

Friday evening faculty recitals are an opportunity for students to learn by observing. Slowik found his inspiration for this summer's theme in "two nice anniversaries" the institute will mark this year. "It's the 375th of the birth of Marc-Antoine Charpentier, and the 350th of the birth of François Couperin," he said. Last Friday's small faculty concert featured Couperin's *L'apothéose di Corelli*, or the welcoming of Arcangelo Corelli into Parnassus. Next Friday, June 29 at 8:00 pm in a larger performance in Warner Concert Hall, faculty members will play Couperin's *L'apothéose di Lulli*, a 31-movement companion piece that does the same honors for Jean-Baptiste Lully.



Couperin



Charpentier

"The first apotheosis is in the form of an Italian trio sonata, which we performed with two violins and a five-stringed, cello-like instrument," Slowik said. "*L'apothéose di Lulli* seems to beg for winds as well, so we'll score it a bit more orchestrally." The charming work, which will be narrated by vocal faculty members Suzie LeBlanc and Max von Egmond, includes a built-in lesson in performance practice: Corelli greets Lully with a serenade in the Italian style, Lully responds in the French style, then the two composers find a way to make music together.

The second half of Saturday's program will feature two large works by Charpentier: his 40-minute opera *Les arts florissants*, and one of his four settings of the *Te Deum*. "This year we've engaged Matthew Robertson of the Washington, D.C.-based ensemble The Thirteen Choir to pull together a less *ad hoc* vocal ensemble than usual," Slowik said. "Eleven choral scholars will be participating in the vocal master

classes, and singing in the Charpentier works.” The opera will be staged by faculty member Julie Andrijeski, but without costumes.



The *Te Deum*, one of six that Charpentier wrote and one of the four that survive, will be familiar to many for its instrumental prelude, used as the theme music for the European Broadcasting Union for six decades. “Settings of this hymn of praise got to be a regular part of celebrations — ranging from the French victory at the Battle of Steinkirk to the King’s recovery from an anal fistula,” Slowik said.

The same hymn proved very unlucky for Lully, who was conducting his own setting at the court of Louis XIV when he accidentally struck himself in the foot with the staff he was using to beat time. When gangrene set in, the composer refused amputation so he could continue to dance. Sepsis developed, and the next thing you knew, Lully was meeting up with Corelli. In a departure from historical performance practice, Slowik said, “I’ll be playing it safe on Saturday and conducting with my hands.”

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