

**Oberlin BPI's *Dido and Aeneas*:  
ten minutes with Lucas Harris**

by Daniel Hathaway



The 48th year of Oberlin's Baroque Performance Institute sports a remarkably inclusive theme: "Music of the Enemies of Louis XIV." BPI's promotional materials note that in addition to engaging in four large-scale conflicts, the French Sun King managed to ruffle the feathers of nearly every major power in Europe during his 72-year reign.

Last week's faculty concert featured music by Joan Cabanilles, Johann Joseph Fux, Johann Heinrich Schmelzer, Heinrich Biber, Johannes Schenck, Tomaso Albinoni, Henry Purcell, and Arcangelo Corelli in a performance that filled Kulas Recital Hall to capacity just with BPI participants.

This Friday evening, June 28 at 7:30 pm, the big faculty/guest concert moves into the much larger space of Warner Concert Hall for Arcangelo Corelli's *Concerto Grosso in D*, Op. 6, No. 4 in D, Petronio Franceschini's *Sonata for Two Trumpets*, and Johann Joseph Fux's *Overture in d*. The evening will close with a semi-staged production of Henry Purcell's tragedy *Dido and Aeneas*, based on Book IV of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Principal roles will be taken by Molly Netter (Dido), Thomas Meglioranza (Aeneas), Clarice Alfonso (Belinda), Caitlin Laird (Second Woman), Elena Mullins and Alexandra Gilman (Witches), Cameron Khan (Sorceress), Phillip Duda (Sailor), and Michael Temesi (Spirit). The BPI intermediate Baroque dance class, led by Elena Mullins, will perform as part of the production.

“It’s a bit of an outlier,” Toronto-based lutenist and Baroque guitarist Lucas Harris said in a Skype conversation when I asked him if *Dido* is or isn’t an opera. “It wasn’t common in England to have operas totally sung. Purcell’s other dramatic works are in the masque tradition — partly spoken, partly sung. But the fact that it’s sung throughout is probably why we like *Dido* so much. It’s such fun music.”

Harris will be playing archlute and guitar in the orchestra for Friday’s performance, but he’s been busy for the last week preparing a chorus for the piece, drawing on another of his skill sets. In Toronto, he’s spent the last five years serving as artistic director for the Toronto Chamber Choir, which has just completed its 50th anniversary season.

He describes his Toronto ensemble as a community choir of auditioned, high-level amateurs, but in the spirit of BPI, where participants are encouraged to try out everything the Institute has to offer, he issued an open invitation for his *Dido* chorus. “The level will be mixed, but inexperienced singers will have stronger colleagues to lean on.”

So far, the 35-member group managed to squeeze in four one-hour rehearsals last week, giving up some of their afternoon ensemble coaching time to learn the fifteen choral pieces in the opera. “We started putting it together last night, and new people were still showing up.”

Harris loves the choral movements in *Dido and Aeneas*. “What’s so fun for me is that the chorus gets to play so many roles. They’re like a Greek chorus at the beginning and end, and in the middle they get to be witches. And they have the last word in ‘With drooping wings ye cupids come’ after Dido takes her own life. There’s so much variety.”

One thing Harris is experiencing for the first time is preparing a chorus and then turning it over to another conductor — in this case to BPI director Kenneth Slowik. “But Ken has all sorts of wonderful ideas. He’s big on bringing out the important words in each chorus.”

Even though he’s not presiding over the final product, Lucas Harris will be listening intently to his choristers from the continuo section. “I’ll stop playing in rehearsal when the chorus is singing and monitor what they’re doing.”

The BPI Faculty/Guest concert on Friday, June 28 at 7:30 pm in Warner Concert Hall at the Oberlin Conservatory is open to the public. Tickets are \$10 at the door. On

Saturday, June 29, a free marathon concert by participant chamber ensembles will begin in Kulas Recital Hall at 2:00 pm.

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