

New Wine in Old Bottles: Cleveland Composers Guild goes Baroque

by Mike Telin



Although it is often said that you cannot put new wine in old bottles — or wineskins, on Friday, March 25 at 7:30 pm in Kulas Music Hall at Baldwin Wallace University, the [Cleveland Composers Guild](#) will show that it can be done.

“New Wine in Old Bottles” features recently composed works by Guild members — new wine — performed by Burning River Baroque’s Malina Rauschenfels (Baroque cello, viola da gamba, and voice), Paula Mast (harpsichord), and guest David Ellis (Baroque cello, viola da gamba, and bass gamba) — old bottles.

“I don’t think the Composers Guild has ever collaborated with an early music group,” Guild president Margi Griebing-Haigh said during a recent telephone conversation. “We were just brainstorming, as we do in Guild meetings, about what projects we would like to pursue in the future. This idea came up and everyone thought it was interesting. So we thought ‘Let’s branch out and see what it’s like to write for gamba and harpsichord.’”

Regarding the guidelines, Griebing-Haigh said that members were invited to submit revisions of previously written pieces or to compose a new work. “They could be anything as long as it was idiomatically written for the instruments involved and in any combination as long as it could be played by no more than three performers.”

In order to avoid as many compositional pitfalls as possible, Rauschenfels and Mast provided detailed information about how to write for the instruments — what works and what should be avoided. “For those of us who haven’t done this before, it was pretty helpful,” Griebing-Haigh said, adding that most of the pieces are not for all three

players, but are written for a number of different instrumental combinations. “Some of the pieces are brand-new and some are inspired by older works.”



Griebeling-Haigh said that her piece, *Atteggiamenti*, is a hybrid. “It’s a piano toccata that had been written years ago and never performed. In my mind it is as harpsichord-like as humanly possible. I rearranged it, created a cello line, and added a movement. But the performers have been very communicative. I’ve had a lot of very good questions from Paula about what I intended here or there. It’s valuable to us as composers to get feedback. I’m looking forward to hearing it.”

When it came to selecting the works for Friday’s program, as is always the case with Composers Guild collaborations, the pieces were submitted anonymously and the final decision was left up to performers.

What were the performers looking for during the selection process? “I think it was more difficult for Paula to decide,” Malina Rauschenfels said during a Skype conversation. “Everyone knows how to write for cello. And all of the pieces written for cello were interesting. I also told people they could write for my voice. So I sent them some recordings. I love working with composers and have them write for the voice that I have rather than the voice they would like me to have.”

Jennifer Connor’s *Truly Free* requires Rauschenfels to both sing and play the cello. “I had a blast learning her piece, and I’m going to add it to my singing and playing repertoire.”

Rauschenfels said that while most of the pieces sound contemporary, some are period-inspired. “Sebastian Birch’s *Ghosts* is written with a lot of Baroque influences, and Ryan Ramer’s *5 songs for Soprano & Basso Continuo* is written with a figured bass. And the three works for me, Paula, and David are all rhythmically and harmonically complex.”

Rauschenfels was also impressed with the quality of the writing. “It’s not like they submitted works for piano and said, hopefully the harpsichord can play this. It’s difficult to explain to a composer the difference between the piano and harpsichord because on the page, the music looks the same.” She noted that while composers know there is no pedal on the harpsichord and that the notes will not sustain as long as on a piano, it is difficult to grasp all of that until you start doing it.

“I love working with composers, it’s one of my favorite things to do. And I haven’t had the opportunity to do that in quite some time. I am so happy this concert is happening and I’m excited to meet all of the composers in person.”

“New Wine in Old Bottles” will include Ryan Ramer’s *5 songs for Soprano & Basso Continuo*, Margi Griebeling Haigh’s *Atteggiamenti*, Jeffrey Quick’s *Virus Free*, Bill Rayer’s *Miniatures*, Lorenzo Salvagni’s *Suit*, Sebastian Birch’s *Ghosts*, Jennifer Conner’s *Truly Free* and Karen Griebeling’s *Alpenmusik*.

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