

OPERA NEWS

FOR CONSIDERATION

NEW TEACHING
VALUES

BY STEPHANIE BLYTHE
P. 14

**A BRAVE
OLD WORLD:
JUILLIARD415**

P. 40

**MEZZO
MARYANN
MCCORMICK**

P. 36

**THE
LEGACY OF
MASTER
CLASS**

P. 32

AN AMERICAN
STAR TENOR
AT HOME
IN EUROPE

BY A. J. GOLDMANN
P. 24

Charles
CASTRONOVO

August 2020

www.operanews.com

+

SFO MUSIC
DIRECTOR
EUN SUN KIM

P. 12

Baroque

ENGLAND

**JUILLIARD'S HISTORICAL
PERFORMANCE PROGRAM PREPARES
BAROQUE PLAYERS FOR
A CHANGED MUSICAL LANDSCAPE.**

BY ADAM WASSERMAN



Members of
Juilliard415,
2019.

AGEMENT



LAST SPRING, just as a pandemic was preparing to send performing arts across the globe into an indeterminate hibernation, Juilliard415, the resident period-instrument ensemble of the Juilliard School, was already self-isolating. Conducted by Robert Mealy, the director of the school's graduate Historical Performance program, the group (named for the pitch standard to which Baroque instruments are tuned) was completing a two-week, ten-city tour of New Zealand that culminated with a performance at the edge of the world: at the Civic Theatre in Invercargill—one of the southernmost cities on earth—the ensemble's concert of works by Handel, Vivaldi, Lully and Rameau became the last performance given by any Juilliard ensemble before the world ground to a halt.

"Just the day before the concert, we got confirmation that school was closing. It was honestly a surreal moment," recalls David Belkovski, the group's harpsichordist, who graduated from Juilliard's Historical Performance program in May with a master of music degree. "We could envision at least another two months of engaging with our peers and growing as an ensemble. That was all cut short."

If the conclusion to the ensemble's season and academic year was abrupt, the importance of Juilliard's Historical Performance program—both to New York City and to the larger music world—represents the consummation of musical trends that have been decades in the making. "Historical performance has often had a relation to the musical establishment as a kind of alternative. But, I think, increasingly that's not the case. It was wonderful to find that the revolution is over now," Mealy says when we connect via Skype in mid-May. It now seems almost inconceivable that the mid-twentieth-century revival of Baroque music to which Mealy refers once seemed to carry an antiestablishment whiff, appearing to be the province of bookish, lute- and recorder-wielding hippies in Birkenstocks at Renaissance Fairs or in church basements. Juilliard's Historical Performance program typifies both the legitimization of that musical revival by one of the foremost conservatories in the U.S. and the realization that contemporary audiences' demand for Baroque music has necessitated the creation of new supply chains. "This music was definitely seen for a long time as a



kind of refuge from the drill-sergeant approach of modern training. The mainstream music education I got felt much more like Russian gymnastics,” says Mealy. “But I think that really, that whole narrative has just changed so much that every student now has to invent their own worlds. There’s much more openness on everyone’s part to exploring these different languages.”

FOUNDED IN 2009, Juilliard’s Historical Performance program was created and endowed through a \$20-million gift by Bruce Kovner, the school’s board chair, who reportedly conceived of the program over a lunch in Aix-en-Provence with Les Arts Florissants founder William Christie. “It was seen as a response, I think, to what was lacking at Juilliard, but also lacking to a certain degree in American conservatories,” says Ben Sosland, the program’s founding administrative director. “I would never ever underplay the role that so many other conservatories that have much longer legacies than ours have played in early music. But for a place like Juilliard, that really had the reputation for nineteenth-century heavy-duty performance in a specific tradition, to open ourselves up to some-

thing quite different got a lot of attention because of our position.”

The program has distinguished itself in other ways: it is tuition-free and offers students the chance to work directly with a roster of visiting artists-in-residence that includes some of the biggest names in Baroque and early music, such as Christie, Paul Agnew, Richard Egarr, Rachel Podger, Jordi Savall and Masaaki Suzuki. “It almost feels more like an apprenticeship than a school or an academic program,” says Belkovski. “I was really taken by how often I was forced to question my understanding of music that I felt I long understood. It seems like every day I’m presented with a new piece of information, often when I’m reading 400-year-old texts, that some people would find inhibiting but that I find incredibly liberating, because it’s often something I didn’t know was possible. That might have been seeing a fermata in the work of Mozart that I had to extemporize, or it could be, when I’m improvising over figures as a continuo player, I’m permitted to do far richer and more extravagant realizations or improvisation that I originally thought. In this repertoire, the performance is as much a part of the composition as the written notes on the page.”

Above, clockwise from top left: William Christie and Juilliard415; Onadek Winan in *Hippolyte et Aricie*, 2018; Juilliard415 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Samantha Hankey and Jakub Józef Orliński in *La Calisto*, 2016

PREVIOUS SPREAD: © RACHEL PAPO; THIS SPREAD: © MICHAEL DEVITO (CHRISTIE); © PAULA LOBO (MET MUSEUM); © ROSALIE O’CONNOR (CALISTO)



While the program has offered its students significant training, its artistic successes have not been cloistered from the public; in collaboration with Juilliard's Ellen and James S. Marcus Institute of Vocal Arts, the Historical Performance program has presented audiences both in and out of New York City with a yearly stream of remarkably polished staged performances of Baroque operas, in addition to numerous smaller concerts spotlighting period vocal music. In February this year, Juilliard Opera and Juilliard415 teamed up to present a sterling concert performance of *Rinaldo* at Alice Tully Hall under the baton of Nicholas McGegan.

"I had already worked for a season and a half all over Germany before I arrived at Juilliard. I don't want to be brutal, but the students at Juilliard were much better than those I was performing with in B-type theaters in Germany," says Polish counter-tenor Jakub Józef Orliński, who took on the roles of Endimione in *La Calisto* and Ottone in *Agrippina* at Juilliard, and who, since his graduation in 2017, has become one of the highest-profile singers to have collaborated with the Historical Performance program. Last summer, Orliński stepped into the title role in *Rinaldo* performances at Glyndebourne to enormous acclaim, but he began working on the opera's music while still at Juilliard. "I remember working on 'Cara sposa,' which has this amazing effect of crying violins that speak with each other and layer and keep growing," he says. "The voice that comes in has to appear as if [out of] nowhere. The program helped me find those places, achieve those effects and work with my technique and vocal colors to unify with the orchestra layer."

"My interactions with historical performance, and particularly the way it's taught at Juilliard, is that it often feels much more futurist and much more modern than something in the standard rep," says Mary Birnbaum, who has served as the associate director of opera studies at Juilliard since 2010, and who directed *Dido and Aeneas* there in 2019. "It's so much more theatrical, and the chance to dictate tempos in a much more loose way, and the improvisatory manner of some of the phrasing, creating this music in the moment, is so freeing and liberating to young singers. It teaches them about the sort of little freedoms that they might not understand or recognize in standard repertoire too."

Avi Stein, who oversees Baroque vocal literature and continuo skills in the Historical Performance program, says the process of acclimating singers to both the style and the improvisatory elements necessitated by a minimally detailed Baroque score begins with the text. "We try to show students that what's on the page is often trying to tell you something beyond the page," he says. "You tap into the drama, and you show them that everything that's written is trying to achieve some larger meaning.

There isn't this grand divide between early music and later music in singing that we might expect," Stein continues. "I go back to talking about the kind of training that good lieder singers have in terms of storytelling and an intimate scale, and applying all those techniques and aesthetics to early music is exactly the way we go."

Soprano Jessica Niles, who is currently pursuing her master of music degree in Vocal Arts, proved particularly impressive when she sang the heroine in Handel's pastoral cantata *Aminta e Fillide* with William Christie at the Morgan Library in 2018. "We put that piece together with William Christie in a span of four days," she recalls. "It was very intense. Definitely, in my life, there is a before and after that performance. Christie told me, 'Don't be afraid to make an ugly sound.' In a conservatory we're trained to make beautiful, consistent sound, but to be given the permission to go over the edge.... We were not doing anything unhealthy—our cords were not at stake. But *Aminta e Fillide* felt like a rock concert. I don't want to go back to any other feeling."

"ONE OF THE GREAT THINGS about early music is that there's no set career path," says Ben Sosland, when asked what he considers to be the Historical Performance program's metric for success. "Students who choose to go into this field tend to be more exploratory and entrepreneurial, so success is very much one's own definition of it. Obviously, it's lovely when we see students winning competitions and becoming soloists and starting their own groups. But for many, it's a way to really create an identity that you can't necessarily [create] with later repertoire, because it's been part of a performing legacy, or the composers have blessed us with such detailed instructions on how to interpret a piece of their recorded legacy—whereas, with this repertoire, so much is up to the performer. There's so much interpretive freedom."

In the present circumstances, one can't help wondering whether the particulars of the Baroque repertoire might make its performers better poised to recover more quickly from the effects of the pandemic. Despite its beauty, Baroque music was composed in desperate times, and this is not the first plague it will endure. "There are these amazing stories that during the Thirty Years' War, Heinrich Schütz lost all of his singers. His ensembles were decimated, so Schütz just changed the format of what he was writing," says oboist Priscilla Herreid, who was part of the Historical Performance program's first graduating class in 2011. "I'm hopeful that early musicians, because most of us are inclined anyway towards experimenting and researching and learning constantly, might be well suited to adapt to all of these new unknowns anyway. This is just another challenge." ■