



**SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
EARLY MUSIC NEWS**

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FROM THE EDITOR

I love madrigals. They say so much about the times in which they were written and first performed. Much of our knowledge of early music comes from the madrigal singing tradition.

If you're like me, you've probably heard (and perhaps sung and played) madrigals in all kinds of settings, from one-on-a-part in the home to grand choral performances to sweet relief from the hurly-burly of a Renaissance faire. Have you ever wondered what a historically-informed approach to madrigal performance might be? This is the subject of our feature article for August, "Madrigals in Their Natural Habitat: Performance Practices of the St. George Early Music Ensemble," written by John Smith, President and Southern Executive Director of the Guild of St. George.

Intrigued? Perhaps an "Elizabethan Evening" with the Guild of St. George might be for you. Read on for details.

Regular readers will note that the "Concert Calendar" is very short this month. It's that late-summer musical drought. If you would like a refreshing apéritif before the fall season, come hear Suite Royale performing "Music of the Baroque: Early, Middle, and Late" at The Master's University in Santa Clarita on Friday, August 31 at 7:30 PM.

There are still a few workshops left for the season. "Things to Come" tells all!

Thank you for your support of early music in Southern California!

Sincerely,

John L. Robinson
Editor-in-Chief, *Southern California Early Music News*
newsletter@earlymusicla.org

CD REVIEW By Laurence Vittes



Biber: *The Mystery Sonatas*, Christina Day Martinson and Boston Baroque, Linn

Canadian violinist Christina Day Martinson serves as concertmaster for Boston Baroque and as associate concertmaster for the Handel and Haydn Society. For a virtuoso in that milieu the ultimate challenge must be either Bach's Six Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin or Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber's sixteen *Mystery Sonatas* for violin and continuo.

Biber's set was written around 1676, half a century before Bach's. They were unknown until their publication in 1905, the original manuscript having been rediscovered only in 1890.

Dedicated to the Archbishop of Salzburg, each of Biber's sonatas suggests meditations on 15 mysteries from the lives of Jesus and his mother, with a concluding Passacaglia for solo violin.

The music was not only obscure, it was of a fiendish difficulty that would have tested Paganini. Its two hours abound in outrageous multi-string chordal propositions like so many musical glottal stops—most of them requiring a variety of *scordatura* mistunings.

Appropriately enough, Martinson's new recording for the Linn label (with three Boston

Baroque colleagues: Martin Pearlman on organ and harpsichord, Michael Unterman on cello, and Michael Leopold on theorbo and guitar), recalls the first-ever recording of the Biber cycle; it was in made on Cambridge Records and the violinist was another woman, Sonya Monosoff. In fact, more than half of the nearly 20 recordings since then have been by women, the most recent being Martinson's.

Martinson was in Boston when I caught up with her by email.

I've heard many recordings of the Biber. Yours has a special intensity. Does it mirror your own personal intensity in any way?

When I performed and recorded the *Mystery Sonatas* last year I was going through a difficult time in my life. Because of my own challenges at the time I could experience the pain and suffering of the story in a more direct and poignant way. Regardless of one's own spiritual beliefs, I think we can all relate to the human suffering and agony of this story. To play all the sonatas in one evening is both a musical and a spiritual journey.

Do you use different instruments for each sonata in live performances?

I use five to six different Baroque violins with gut strings for live performances: one only for Sonata No. 11, where strings are crossed; and one for No. 8, where the G string is tuned up a fifth. I divide the other four instruments between the other 12 sonatas. I keep the tunings as close as possible for each sonata. For example: violin 1 is for Sonatas 1, 4, 10, 14, and the Passacaglia; violin 2 is for Sonatas 3, 7,

9, and 12; violin 3 is for Sonatas 2 and 5; and violin 4 for Sonatas 6, 13, and 15.

You must have a battery of assistants backstage, frantically tuning violins.

To enable the performance to flow, I need a tuner backstage who comes out after each sonata and hands me the next violin. She takes the violin I just played and tunes it for the next sonata. That person is my assistant Julia McKenzie, who has worked with me on every performance—and on the recording. She is a wonderful violinist herself and has played such an integral part in this whole process. I always feel confident knowing she is there taking care of it all.

Amazingly I have never broken a string in performance, and Julia has never brought me the wrong violin. Now I have to knock on wood!

Can the experience be approximated on a regularly-tuned violin?

With his dramatic *scordatura* tuning, Biber found a way to create sound worlds that were unique to each sonata. The violins resonate differently because of the tunings and different tensions of the strings. These colors cannot be replicated on a regularly-tuned violin. This is what makes these sonatas exceptional, but also challenging. These “mistunings” create a host of difficulties and mind games, or puzzles, for the performer. Because of these unorthodox demands, many of the traditional rules and ways of approaching the violin have to be “thrown out the window.”

Is the Biber cycle equivalent in some way to the Bach Solo Sonatas?

For me, the Bach Sonatas are really not parallel to the *Mystery Sonatas*. They are two great, huge works in two different worlds. There just is nothing else to this day like the *Mystery Sonatas* in the repertoire. No one came close to this kind of experimenting with *scordatura*.

Do you think of these as specific programmatic fantasies, or pathways to inner religious feelings aroused by contemplation of the Mysteries?

The programmatic element of these pieces is ambiguous and at times confusing. Playing the cycle you really feel the drama and events in the story, but if you look at each sonata individually, some of them are puzzling in how the title and story event match the affect of the music.

For example, “Scourging at the Pillar” (No. 7) and “Crowning with Thorns” (No. 8) are both very upbeat and joyous sonatas. They are both in major keys and there is not an obvious sorrowful affect in either sonata. But in other sonatas the programmatic elements are more obvious. I do think the religious, contemplative side of these sonatas brings the performer and listener into a meditative state of being. There is a kind of transformation that is experienced when one enters into this two-hour journey.

It is all too easy of course to focus on these innovative and extraordinary compositional aspects of Biber’s *Mystery Sonatas* when we think of this work. I find, however, that the music itself is what is most captivating—visceral, and full of drama and expressive power.

—Reprinted from *Strings* magazine online

MADRIGALS IN THEIR NATURAL HABITAT: PERFORMANCE PRACTICES OF THE ST. GEORGE EARLY MUSIC ENSEMBLE

John H. Smith, IV

The pursuit of period performance practices derives from a desire to experience music in the way that the music was originally experienced by the composer and contemporaries.

Generally, the emphasis is on the *sound* of the music, with musicians performing on authentic or reproduction instruments, using period-correct bowing technique, understanding the nuances of the written music, etc. Fundamentally, it is a desire to better understand and experience the past.

This same desire motivates the activities of the Guild of St. George (www.guildofstgeorge.com/home.html) and our associated St. George Early Music Ensemble. Our mission is to teach history through interactive theater. This requires us to immerse ourselves fully in all aspects of the past and to recreate this as accurately as possible. As we have chosen to specialize in the aristocracy of sixteenth-century England, our interest extends to all things Elizabethan, both for its own sake and as a way to understand the modern world better. Our research into the Elizabethan age has yielded some interesting conclusions about the place of the Renaissance madrigal in the society of the time and influences the way we perform this music.

Madrigals in particular were written and published for use in a domestic setting by talented amateurs, whether at a family gathering in the home of a middle-class merchant or amongst a group of courtiers singing after supper in the privy chamber of a palace.

As I have written before in the *Southern California Early Music Newsletter*¹, whereas most classical music from the eighteenth century to now is performed in a setting and manner consistent with the intent of the original presenters, music from earlier periods does not always enjoy this advantage. Not only was the modern concert hall unknown to the composers and performers of the Renaissance, but the idea of passively listening to music would have been foreign to them.

Whether it was broadsheets sung in a tavern, dance music accompanying a rustic wedding or for courtly entertainment, or a madrigal collection published with appropriately obsequious dedications to a noble patron, all music was intended to be participatory. Two exceptions were music written to accompany theatrical productions and music to be performed as part of a church service, but even then the level of engagement and immediacy of the audience was much higher than experienced in a modern concert setting.

Madrigals in particular were written and published for use in a domestic setting by talented amateurs, whether at a family gathering in the home of a middle-class merchant or amongst a group of courtiers singing after supper in the privy chamber of a palace. They were fundamentally diversions and

entertainment for the singers themselves. An “audience” was either non-existent or extraneous to the performance. The result is music that is complex and polyphonic, with each of the parts (whether three or twelve) individually interesting and singable.

Unfortunately, the richness of the madrigal form, with its complex interplay between and amongst the parts that makes this music so interesting to sing, creates issues for modern performance. Both the text and the music can be difficult for the casual listener to follow. Like opera and many other types of serious music, the madrigal rewards those who accustom themselves to sophistication and subtlety. Modern pop music, though, is so simplistic that people are not used to putting effort into listening. In addition, as Shakespearian actors can attest, our way of receiving information has moved from aural to visual over the past 400 years. In the centuries since madrigals were penned, audiences, to a greater or lesser extent, have lost the ability to listen carefully.

Madrigals also present performance issues. Professional singers often feel that madrigals do not merit their attention, being insufficiently sophisticated or “flashy.” In most cases, though, madrigals are too difficult to be learned quickly and easily by casual singers, discouraging their performance by amateurs. As a result, there are few opportunities for audiences to become acquainted with this musical form.

Given these circumstances, the St. George Early Music Ensemble has chosen to follow an unusual path in presenting madrigals to the public.

First, we are careful in the selection of the pieces we learn, and then take the time to learn them thoroughly. The ensemble is kept small

deliberately, with two people per voice part. Though we are classically-trained singers, none of us make a living by singing. We are the type of talented amateurs for whom this music was written. We rehearse regularly and have been singing together for ten years. We have learned about 50 pieces from the standard repertoire, as well as several that are seldom, if ever, performed elsewhere. We learn “foreign” pieces in their original languages, and sing “Englished” pieces in a clearly enunciated American accent that we think creates an understandable version of Elizabethan English. We perform without a conductor, which promotes careful listening to each other, and take a collaborative approach to issues such as tempos² and pronunciation.

BIOGRAPHY: JOHN H. SMITH IV



John Smith is the President and Southern Executive Director of the Guild of St. George, Inc. An early interest in music of the Renaissance and all things Elizabethan prompted him and his wife to join the Guild of St. George in 1996. They joined the Guild’s Early Music Ensemble and soon became integral members of the organization. John became president of the corporation in 2004. Like the late John Leicester [a much-missed pillar of the early music community in Southern California—Ed.], John is an aerospace engineer by training and trade, which allows him to relate equally to the past, present, and future.

To the sound of the music we add a visual element. We perform in character and in costume. Each singer is foremost an actor portraying a specific person known to history. The costumes worn are accurate and appropriate to that specific character, whether the somber colors of Lord Treasurer Burghley³ or the more flamboyant clothes of the ladies surrounding the Queen. We then sing in a setting that is representative of a period environment. At the Huntington Library, we re-create an afternoon spent in the garden of a palace or great house. For an Elizabethan feast, we re-create the presence chamber of a royal palace, or the chambers of a noble peer. Finally, we situate ourselves in an appropriate, informal way, *e.g.*, standing under a tree or an arbor in a garden, or seated around a table after eating a meal indoors. The combination of setting and clothes creates an accurate picture that enhances the experience.

Finally, we use the tools of theater to pull everything together and create a complete contextual performance. We set our performances within a specific, if hypothetical, historical context. For instance, the Shakespeare Garden at the Huntington Library might represent the grounds of Chelsea Palace in the spring of 1587 and the performers portray some of the people who would have been at home in that setting. We demonstrate how the people for whom the music was written would have approached the music, especially how it would have been treated not with reverence, but as casual entertainment liable to be changed on the fly by aristocrats. Portraying the singers as members of the Elizabethan aristocracy also allows us to show the relationships among the courtiers and how each person would approach the singing of madrigals in a slightly different way. The Elizabethan Age was a musical age and the courtly culture of Renaissance Europe

encouraged, in fact demanded, the composition of the most sophisticated music—music performed not only by professional musicians, but by both active and aspiring members of the aristocracy. This makes it appropriate for us to include music in every aspect of our performances.

We are fortunate that most of our performance opportunities are fluid in nature and include a variety of elements. This allows us to present several short song sets (about 20 minutes each) over the course of an event. This does not tax the attention span of our audience or the stamina of our singers.

In all of our performances we strive to capture the essence of *sprezzatura*, a word originally from Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*. It is defined by the author as “a certain nonchalance, which conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless.” As in a modern “reality” television show, we strive to make our performances appear unplanned and spontaneous, when in fact they are carefully planned and rehearsed. For instance, we generally do not establish a set sequence of pieces and actually do choose what to sing as we go along, but we are selecting from a carefully constructed list of options. We know that we are successful when our audience accuses us of not acting at all!

Most important of all, we want our performance to convey our pleasure in what we are doing. This music, written to be entertaining 400 years ago, is still tremendously fun to sing, and singing it with a group of musicians who are talented and supportive is a soul-satisfying experience that we love to share with our audience. What our performance may lack in technique, we make up for in joy!

In most cases, when we have followed the performance practices described, we have been able to attract and reach a sizable audience. Years ago, at a Members Evening at the Huntington, I was expecting that the audience would dwindle after a short intermission, but instead it only got larger. More recently, at the Huntington's Shakespeare Day in April of this year, we attracted an audience of 50 or more every time we gathered to sing—and left them asking for more.

We have found, after many years and many different performances, that the Renaissance madrigal works best when performed in a

holistically period manner. This includes not just the music, but the appropriate setting and purpose of the music. Like a lion best seen on the plains of Africa, the madrigal is best understood and appreciated when presented in its natural setting. It is the mission of the Guild of St. George to create such a setting and allow this wonderful art form to shine in all its glory.

Footnotes

1 "In Search of Context" (May 2012) and "The Rebirth of the Madrigal Feast" (February 2013).

2 An interesting observation: these pieces almost always work best at the tempo of a natural heartbeat.

3 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Cecil,_1st_Baron_Burghley

THE GUILD OF ST. GEORGE, INC.



The Guild of St. George is a California non-profit educational corporation whose mission is to teach history through interactive theater. The organization's specialty is the aristocracy of Tudor England. The Guild produces or participates in a variety of educational events each year throughout California. To fulfill this educational charter, the Guild accurately replicates all aspects of the

Elizabethan world, from costume to language to dinnerware, and invites the public to experience the past with us.

The volunteer members of the Guild of St. George comprise a wide variety of ages, professions, and abilities. Each participant provides his or her own historically-accurate costume and props which must meet the exacting standards of the Guild. Throughout the year, Guild members attend workshops focusing on history, acting, and presentation. The Guild also provides classes and rehearsals of Renaissance song and dance, which were important skills for a Renaissance courtier of any nation. As a result of this effort, The Guild of St. George creates a memorable and accurate representation of the glory that was Elizabethan England.

Please visit the Guild's website at www.guildofstgeorge.com/home.html for more information on the Guild and its programs.

AN ELIZABETHAN EVENING SEPTEMBER 29, 2018



On Saturday, September 29, 2018, the Guild of St. George will present an authentic time-travel experience that captures the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of an evening meal in a royal palace in Renaissance England. A meal of period food will be prepared, instrumental music will be provided by The Wessex Consort, and sixteenth-century madrigals and courtly dances will be performed by the

elegantly-costumed members of the Guild. The Guild of St. George Elizabethan Evening will be held at a private club in Whittier. Costumes are welcome but not required. The cost is \$25 per person. Because of the size of the room, the event will be limited to 25 people. Please contact the Guild for more information at GuildmasterSouth@guildofstgeorge.org.

CONCERT CALENDAR

FRIDAY, AUGUST 31, 7:30 PM **Suite Royale presents Music of the Baroque: Early, Middle, and Late**

Suite Royale members John Robinson (flauto taillo, flauto basso and bass dulcian), Jim Garafalo (viola da gamba), and Ruta Bloomfield (harpsichord), joined by guest artist M. Anne Rardin (Baroque violin) take you on a musical

journey from the dawn of the Baroque to its close with compositions by Boismortier, Frescobaldi, Michel de La Barre, Gaspard Le Roux, Johann Pfeiffer and Daniel Speer.

The Master's University, Powell Library, 21726 Placerita Canyon Road, Santa Clarita, CA 91321. FREE. For more information, please e-mail SuiteRoyale@gmail.com or call 310-729-0173.

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The Early Music Around Town

online calendar features the very latest listings with updates and additions at <http://www.earlymusicla.org>. Report listing corrections and any errors to the Calendar Editor at calendar@earlymusicla.org.

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For SCEMS Members Only! The following ensembles are among those offering special pricing for members of the Southern California Early Music Society for selected performances: Con Gioia • Jouyssance • LA Master Chorale • LA Opera • Los Angeles Baroque Players • Musica Angelica • Tesseræ

For additional information on special pricing for selected performances, please consult the SCEMS calendar or contact SCEMS at info@earlymusicla.org or www.earlymusicla.org.

THINGS TO COME

EMAT Calendar www.earlymusicla.org/calendar, a monthly shortlist of local early music concerts and events.

Current Master Calendar www.earlymusicla.org/2017-2018-calendar, a list of the entire season of concerts and events.

The 17th Prescott Recorder Workshop will be held from August 11th to 12th, 2018 in Prescott, AZ. The workshop focus is “Music, Mystery, and Mayhem with Jennifer Carpenter.” For more information, please go to <https://www.desertpipes.org/Images/Prescott2018flyer.pdf>.

Pinewoods Early Music Week will be held from August 11th to 17th, 2018 at Pinewoods Camp, Plymouth, MA. The focus is “Euterpe meets Terpsichore.” For more information, please go to <https://www.cdss.org/programs/dance-music-song-camps/camp-weeks/early>.

The Kyuquot Sound Early Music Workshop for Recorder & Viol Players

will be held from August 31st to September 4th, 2018 in Kyuquot, BC (Canada) featuring the “Music on the Sound” Festival. For more information, please go to http://www.seattle-recorder.org/Regional_Workshops/Index.html.

The Seattle Recorder Society Late September Workshop for Recorders, Voices & Winds

will be held from September 29th to 30th, 2018 in Seattle, WA. For more information, please go to http://www.seattle-recorder.org/SRS_Workshops/SRS_Workshop_Faculty.html.

The Boston Early Music Festival has announced its 2018–2019 season. For more information, please go to www.bemf.org.

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