

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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EVERYTHING NEW IS OLD AGAIN – PART I

by Grant Colburn with Micaela Schmitz

"Newly discovered works for the harpsichord!" For some, such news makes them drool and dream at the excitement of playing and hearing music which has lain dormant and undiscovered for centuries while waiting for some "Sherlock Holmes" musicologist to find the dust laden manuscript and publish it for the world to know. New keyboard works by the child Mozart have recently been unearthed as well as works by Bach, Purcell and Froberger in the last few years. But now a new kind of baroque discovery has been taking place, headed by a small group of living composers whose influence is starting to be felt world wide.

These are the composers of *Vox Saeculorum*, a guild of composers living in the present day who are devoted to a revival of composition in the baroque idiom. They come from all parts of the world, from Israel to Sweden, Italy to Canada, and from England to the heart of the American Midwest. Wherever the influence of the early music movement has touched down, there seem to be performers and composers who are taking the leap from the acceptable realm of early music ornamentation and improvisation into the greater world of writing "new period music".

They have increasingly found interested performers and ensembles willing to perform their works, including concertos, smaller ensembles and even large scale works like the cantatas and oratorios by Miguel Robaina. One of the biggest things coming up will be the premiere of the Concerto for Four Harpsichords that Gianluca Bersanetti is currently writing. It shows the trend for such music to be taken seriously by modern period performers. Perhaps both performers and audiences are looking for something different from the highly abstract and dissonant music which seems have been the modern way of composing for the harpsichord.

Yet it may not be as big of a leap as one would initially believe. For years we have been told how modern baroque performers should vary the repeats in pieces, how singers of baroque opera and arias are expected to elaborate the *da capo* upon its return, or even how any respectable early keyboard performer (or other continuo instrument) should be expected

to create an authentic accompaniment using the numbers and symbols provided by a figured bass. Seen in such a light then, taking the step from performer/arranger to performer/composer seems to be only a natural progression.

For this article, we are focusing on two composers of *Vox Saeculorum* who have specifically taken an interest in creating new works for the harpsichord. (Next month we'll have interviews of Fernando de Luca and Grant Colburn.) First we give a little background to each composer and the compositions enclosed in this magazine, then the interviews.

Vox Saeculorum Composers and Works:

Miguel Robaina of Sweden, in addition to writing keyboard works, also writes instrumental sonatas, concertos and even has a complete Christmas oratorio to his credit. A devoted church musician by day, Robaina often has his works performed by his ensemble, *Les Musiciens de l'îlot Royal*, which also includes baroque violinist and fellow Vox composer David Jansson. Robaina has done much to promote both his own music as well as that of other composers with his online Scharffeneck Collection, an assemblage of contemporary music convincingly written in ancient idioms by a variety of composers.

Scores: Allemande from *Pièces de Clavecin - Première Livre*, composed in 1997 Allemande from *Seconde Suite pour le Clavecin*, composed in 2004.
Visit: <http://musiciens.000webhost.info/index2.htm>
Listen: http://www.gfhbaroque.it/sala_del_cembalo/archivio/vox/robaina.htm

An Italian expatriate now living in California, **Gianluca Bersanetti** teaches music to children at the Turning Point School in Culver City. Early in life Bersanetti developed a passion for the works of J. S. Bach and resolved to learn as much as possible about the mechanisms of period music by studying classic treatises of the late Renaissance and Baroque. Bersanetti has written in almost all musical forms, but as of late has been writing a collection of harpsichord

Miguel Robaina

Allegro

1

6

11

16

20

Inventio VII

a 3 voci

G. Bersanetti

Poco andante

20

29

37

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The sheet music consists of six staves of musical notation, likely for a wind ensemble. The staves are arranged in two groups of three. The top group (measures 44-59) features a treble clef and a bass clef, both in G major (three sharps). The bottom group (measures 60-80) features a treble clef and a bass clef, both in C major (no sharps or flats). The notation includes various note heads, stems, and rests, with some notes connected by horizontal lines. Measure numbers 44, 52, 60, 66, 73, and 80 are visible on the left side of the staves.

sonatas inspired by Domenico Scarlatti. His most recent achievement has been a commission to write a concerto for four harpsichords and strings to be performed by the ensemble L'Arte dell'Arco at the annual world-renowned festival "Grandezze & Meraviglie" in Modena, Italy in late October, 2009. It will be directed by Federico Guglielmo, with the harpsichordists Michele Barchi, Roberto Loreggian, Francesca Bacchetta and Francesco Baroni.

Score: Invention VII for three voices in E Major

This Invention: www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FdgvwNOi0o&feature=channel

A Scarlatti influenced Sonata: www.youtube.com/watch?v=S52Cwj63n30

Visit: <http://www.youtube.com/user/bersa888>

The Interviews

We posed a set of seven questions. Each question is followed by the responses from the two composers. In what follows Miguel Robaina (MR) and Gianluca Bersanetti (GB) will be used for their responses.

1. How would you describe your (own) style of composition?

MR: I would describe it as my own style of composition, inspired by the musical languages of the baroque period. I'm not trying to copy a specific composer or even styles for that matter.

GB: Late Baroque style - A healthy mix of German (Bach) and Italian (Corelli, Vivaldi, D. Scarlatti)

2. How did you become attracted to the harpsichord as an instrument for which to compose?

MR: Since I'm a harpsichord-player it came naturally.

GB: The harpsichord is essential to a true "baroque" sound, whether as a solo instrument or as part of the continuo group. I was lucky enough to grow up listening to Couperin and Scarlatti played on harpsichords (Northern European organs for Bach). Later I also discovered how much better and more fitting Bach's music was on a harpsichord when compared to a piano version of the same.

3. What do you think are the biggest pitfalls in composing for harpsichord (e.g. have you advice for other composers)?

MR: Learn the language as well as possible before you start to write! Get information about the instrument; listen to it. Study the masters of harpsichord composition. Try out an instrument; feel it. If you can't play the instrument yourself, look for advice from one who can.

GB: I believe that a deep knowledge of Bach's, Couperin's and D. Scarlatti's works is essential for a true understanding of the instrument. There are of course many other important composers who wrote for harpsichord, but the sheer quality and quantity of these three composers' works could alone suffice for building a solid foundation of idiomatic writing for the instrument. For instance: I never liked how low, left-hand chords in close position sounded on a piano, while I find them fantastic on a harpsichord!

4. Can you remember a single event, concert, performance or experience that really inspired you to compose?

MR: I often get inspired to compose right after a performance of my music or when I have the opportunity to get some scores published. Nice comments about my compositions also inspire me, when my music has touched people's hearts.

GB: I remember - as a kid of about seven or eight - looking at photographs of autograph scores by Bach and Mozart, and finding them beautiful and intriguing. There were also many early music concerts in my town (Bergamo, Italy), such as organ recitals, and instrumental and vocal music being played in churches and similar venues.

5. Of your own compositions, which are your favourites and why?

MR: I like all the music God has given me the opportunity to give birth to. Each composition also reminds me of a specific period or event in my past life and represents my history in some sense.

GB: Amongst the harpsichord pieces, possibly my E Major Sonata, because, although clearly inspired by D. Scarlatti, I believe I was able to create something personal in

terms of form and technique. The E Major 3-part Invention is a close second, though.

6. Why have you chosen to write baroque or period music for harpsichord as opposed to writing more contemporary music which could also be suited for harpsichord?

MR: Since I was a kid, singing with the Stockholm boys choir, I have always had a special place for early music in my heart. I feel like that kind of music is the most natural for me in composing. My brain has adapted early music idioms and from that source of inspiration my music is formed and written down on paper. I also write in other styles sometimes, such as pop, heavy metal and music inspired by the romantic period of the nineteenth century. But these are exceptions; the early music idiom is standard for me.

GB: With few exceptions, I generally find the unconventional use of conventional instruments quite silly and meaningless (like hitting a French horn with a bamboo stick, or slowly spilling a bucket of water over a violin). I'm all for innovation and new directions, but there are other means to get there (using electronic instruments, to name one...).

7. What has been the public reaction to your choosing to create new works which are modeled on baroque or period music, either with performers or audiences hearing your works?

MR: People wonder why you do it. Especially some scholars question the meaning of it, when there already exists a lot of original music from that time - and some of it has yet to be performed. Well, I don't care. Those are only a small group of critics. What's comes out of my brain is what comes out. If someone likes it - fine, and if they don't like it - fine. I have a period instrument ensemble called *Les Musiciens de l'îlot Royal* and we regularly perform this kind of music written by me and one of my violinists, David Jansson. We always get nice comments and good responses during and after our shows. People in general like this; they are curious and want to know more. But it's very hard to get contemporary early music out to a large audience and it's extremely hard to get scores printed by a publisher. This is an underground movement, and in some sense I like that. The internet is therefore a good media to expose your music, if you are interested in doing that.

GB: I was surprised to find so many professional musicians and scholars who shared my taste for this kind of enterprise. And the general-middle-of-the-road music lovers-audience always seem pleasantly surprised. I honestly don't see why anyone should hate a good, solid, piece of music, no matter how much it might be reminiscent of a very familiar musical style or period. I was given a tangible confirmation of this when I received a commission to write a concerto for four harpsichords and strings by the *Associazione Musicale Estense* (Este Music Association for the Diffusion of Early Music). The premiere will be in October 2009 at their annual festival (*Grandezze & Meraviglie*) held in Modena, Italy.

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