



COMMUNICATION: CONFERENCE REPORT

## 20th Biennial International Conference on Baroque Music Haute École de Musique de Genève, Geneva, 28 June–2 July 2023

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Since its inception in 1984 the Biennial International Conference on Baroque Music (BICBM) has taken place mostly in the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland. In 2002 it ran for the first time on the European mainland, in Logroño, and from that point a number of conferences were organized on the continent, in Poland (Warsaw, 2006), Austria (Salzburg, 2014) and Italy (Cremona and Mantua, 2018). A steady rhythm was maintained until 2020, when, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the conference planned for Birmingham had to be deferred to 2021 and moved online. After the conventional two-year interval it was a great joy to meet again, this time in person, in Geneva from Wednesday 28 June to Sunday 2 July 2023. This year's conference was hosted by the Haute École de Musique de Genève on four levels of the Bâtiment Dufour, a beautiful nineteenth-century building in the historic heart of the city.

The conference featured 140 papers, delivered over three days (Saturday 1 July was set aside for 'excursions', followed by the main concert) in four parallel sessions. A small number of these papers were pre-recorded or read by colleagues on behalf of their authors, perhaps reflecting the ongoing challenges of travel and travel-related funding in a post-Covid world. It is impossible to do justice within a short report to the range of topics and approaches in a conference of this size; none the less, a few themes stood out. As usual, there were multiple sessions on national traditions of music-making. Those which received particular emphasis this year were Italian vocal music, both sacred and secular (fewer papers dealt with Italian instrumental music); French music, both vocal and instrumental (with many papers given by French and Swiss presenters); and music in England, largely concerning Handel, Purcell and – to a lesser extent – the Playfords. Although relatively little was said about areas beyond metropolitan Western Europe, some scholars did present on music in Greece, Spain, Russia and Poland. Regarding the last, a particular highlight was a session dedicated to Poland and Silesia. Three interesting and well-researched papers exploring monastic sources from these territories by Marek Bebak (Uniwersytet Jagielloński), Grzegorz Joachimiak (Uniwersytet Wrocławski) and Maciej Jochymczyk (Uniwersytet Jagielloński) were especially effective in illuminating underexplored repertoires, composers and institutions, whilst also reminding us of the porous regional and national boundaries in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century central Europe. Still, a general lack in the programme of papers addressing topics connected with musics in Asia, Africa or the Americas – exceptions included a paper on performance practice in Mexico City Cathedral by Drew Edward Davies (Northwestern University) – shows that the decolonizing process in our discipline still has some way to go.

On the other hand, a strong theme emerged concerning links between music, place and institutions. Here, several presenters took an interdisciplinary approach to their source material, including

Ilaria Grippaudo (Università di Palermo) and Scott Edwards (CUNY School of Professional Studies; IES Abroad Vienna), whose research mapped the soundscapes of early-modern Palermo and Vienna respectively. Likewise, Noel O'Regan (University of Edinburgh) shared valuable findings regarding the architecture and acoustics of Roman oratories in the seventeenth century. Spatial perspectives were also well represented in papers which dealt with issues of scenography, settings and stage directions in theatrical contexts. Stand-out examples included a paper by Martina Papiro (Schola Cantorum Basiliensis) on scenography and stagecraft in Jommelli's *Didone abbandonata* (1763) and one by Margaret Murata (University of California Irvine) on 'opera scenica' in early eighteenth-century Naples and Rome. Another mode of interdisciplinarity with respect to primary sources was on display in papers by Chun-Hao Chen (National Taiwan University) and Bettina Varwig (University of Cambridge), both of whom drew on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century medical treatises in order to explore contemporaneous experiences of musical listening.

Compared with previous iterations of the BICBM, the 2023 programme featured only a few papers that focused specifically on Johann Sebastian Bach and his compositions. This was perhaps a reflection of relatively low participation from German scholars at this year's conference. Yet it may also be part of a general shift away from some of the discipline's former mainstays, and towards a more diverse range of subject material (the aforementioned European focus notwithstanding). The increasingly wide range of topics and approaches on offer at the BICBM could signal that it is time to move beyond sessions dedicated to individual composers (which, in any case, were in the minority this year), and towards grouping papers on the basis of broader thematic or methodological categories. Certainly, the sessions which worked especially well – and which fostered some of the most interesting discussions – were in the latter category. From this perspective, the sessions 'Popular Music and Unwritten Practices' (which encompassed case studies from Italy, France and Germany) and 'Cross-Cultural Connections in Religious Settings' (which included papers on Italian, English and Mexican institutions) seemed especially well curated. The shift away from composer-focused research was also apparent from those presentations that were dedicated to individual historical performers, a highlight of which was Valentina Anzani (Instituto Complutense de Ciencias Musicales, Madrid) shedding new light on the lonely death of the famous castrato Giovanni Carestini (1700–1759).

Continuing the focus on performance were several engaging lecture-recitals on aspects of both vocal and instrumental practice. Particularly compelling papers included those by Lisandro Abadie (Schola Cantorum Basiliensis) and Alessandro Urbano (Conservatoire à Rayonnement Régional Gabriel Pierné Eurométropole de Metz) on organ tremulants; Donna Agrell (Koninklijk Conservatorium Den Haag), Giovanni Battista Graziadio (Schola Cantorum Basiliensis) and Carlos Bertão (Haute École de Musique de Genève) on the revival of small bassoon relatives such as fagottini and tenoroons; Marcin Habela and Danae Bletsas (both Haute École de Musique de Genève) on applying the methods of baroque rhetorical performance to contemporary music; Inês d'Avena (Koninklijk Conservatorium Den Haag) on reconstructing lost manuscript versions of recorder pieces that had had their ranges adjusted by publishers so as to facilitate amateur performance; Thérèse de Goede (Conservatorium van Amsterdam) on the use of non-chordal notes, melodic doublings, parallel intervals and other 'infelicities' in written-out accompaniments in eighteenth-century continuo treatises; and Nicholas Kleinman (Universität Mozarteum) on fugal movements in Telemann's fantasias for solo viola da gamba, movements which complicate our present-day understanding of what a fugue can be.

If Johann Sebastian Bach was relatively lightly represented across the programme of the conference itself, any deficit was splendidly made up for in a feast of Bach at the evening concert at the Salle Franz Liszt, "'Jesus nahm zu sich die Zwölfe": Audition Cantatas of 1723', performed by Gli Angeli Genève with students of the early-music and vocal departments of the Haute École de Musique de Genève. The ensemble was directed by Stephan MacLeod (Haute École de Musique de Genève), who adeptly pivoted between singing the bass solos and directing the performance,

sometimes both at once. Perhaps the only criticism that might be levelled at an otherwise immensely enjoyable concert relates to the programme itself. It would have been fascinating to have heard the audition pieces for the Leipzig Thomaskantorat by Georg Philipp Telemann and Christoph Graupner, both of whom were offered the position in preference to Bach.

In terms of practicalities, it is worth noting that many participants only attended the first two days of the conference. One factor influencing this may have been the decision to have an ‘excursion’ day in the middle of the event, which significantly increased the cost of staying for the entire duration (in what is already an expensive city). The departure of many delegates after the second day might have played a role in the cancellation of the two excursions which had originally been scheduled (a visit to a cheesemaker and chocolatier, and a trip across the lake to the picturesque villages of Évian-les-Bains and Yvoire). If this change of plan was a little disappointing, delegates could at least find consolation in the delicious irony of these tantalizing earthly delights being replaced by an excursion entitled ‘Calvin and the Protestant Reformation’ – the reformer himself would surely have approved. One unfortunate – albeit unforeseeable – circumstance was that those delegates who found accommodation across the border in France (thereby avoiding Switzerland’s notoriously high prices) were caught out by the sudden closure of France’s public transport system because of riots taking place across the country. Although there was little sign of unrest in the immediate area, the closures resulted in a long, though not unpleasant, walk across the border for affected delegates following the evening concert and conference dinner.

Finally, throughout the conference, the weather was very hot, and the venue struggled to cope. Participants were grateful to the organizers for providing folding fans (alas, not illustrated with pastoral scenes!) and for mustering portable air-conditioning units. While the latter made the temperature a little more bearable, they were noisy, and in some cases made it difficult to hear the speakers. The problem of hot weather looks set to remain a challenge for future summer conferences owing to the unfolding climate crisis. None the less, hearty congratulations are due to the organizing committee, chaired by Elizabeth Dobbin (Haute École de Musique de Genève), for running a well-coordinated and largely seamless conference despite the difficulties presented by the weather and French politics.

At the time of writing, no host has yet been found for the next BICBM, scheduled for 2025. Although previously there had been an expectation that the 2025 BICBM would take place in the United Kingdom, the committee have now decided to invite expressions of interest from institutions from across Europe. Hopefully a host will be announced soon, continuing a new biennial cycle in odd-numbered years, and maintaining the impressive tradition of research dissemination and scholarly exchange that the conference has now fostered for nearly four decades.

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