A

LTHOUGH THE DAYS SEEM to be just about gone when historical performance could be referred to as a “movement,” early music culture still retains something of a local, grassroots, word-of-mouth character. Audiences get to know the main performers in their local area, and in North America it’s easy to at least glean a general sense of what goes on in the bicoastal hot spots. For more distant lands, we have recordings and occasional touring visits by international performers. These can give a tantalizing sense of how the fine points of musical style might tend to vary in other countries, but behind the music-making lies a whole dimension of cultural structures, some of them very different from ours, that gives shape to the endeavor.

To kick off a series of articles spotlighting early music abroad, we take a look at the French early music scene through the eyes of Americans in Paris. Some are international early music stars. One of these, Sequentia director Benjamin Bagby, recently relocated to Paris after 23 years in Cologne, Germany, while Boston Camerata director Joel Cohen maintains a dual career in Boston and Paris. But performers like these, in company with figures like William Christie and Skip Sempé, form only the most visible layer of a sizeable American expatriate contingent that makes a palpable contribution to early music in France.

Demeurer et travailler

Brian Cummings was still an undergraduate at Indiana University when he had his first experience making music in Paris. He was invited by Paul Hillier to perform there as countertenor soloist in the world premiere of John Adams’s opera *El Niño*. Since then, Cummings has appeared in subsequent performances of the work with major symphony orchestras and directors all over the world, but Paris was the city with which he fell in love. “It then took nearly five years for the right moment to come to actually move there.” In 2005, he says, “I came with a few suitcases, very few contacts, no working papers nor place to live, and the intuition that it was the right place for me to be.” Today, Cummings works both in Europe and back in the States, where he performs with Timothy Nelson’s young early opera company American Opera Theater.

The choice to put down roots in a new country is rarely motivated by work alone. “Love took me to Paris,” reports viol player and musicologist Jonathan Dunford. “I met a Parisian viol player in 1984 in Jordi Savall’s class in Basel – Sylvia Abramowicz. Sainte-Colombe was our common language and still is 23 years later.” The couple plays as a duo, A Deux Violes Esgales, which specializes in newly-discovered music in original, unedited sources. Dunford also directs the French viol music databank at the Centre de Musique Baroque de Versailles and has written entries in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Still, he says, “I am firstly and foremostly a performer.” His own discography is devoted primarily to unedited works for solo

Les Américains à PARIS

For American early musicians, living overseas in the city of light can be both liberating and lonely
bass viol. Dunford’s recent work includes improvised contemporary music on an electric viol with guitarist Fred Frith.

In 1970, Judith Kraft was exploring Europe, eager to learn about instrument building. “At the time, my mind was not on viols.” She had written to ask for an apprenticeship at the Dolmetsch workshop, “mostly because they built instruments, not because they built early instruments. I mentioned that I would be willing to sweep the floor.”

In Paris, she worked as an au pair for a family who introduced her to an instrument maker. Kraft started with harpsichords but moved towards viols. “I figured that once the early music ‘fad’ wore out, I would start making violins. Over 35 years later, I have made some violins, but there are more viol players looking for viols than I would ever have imagined.” Performers who own Judith Kraft viols include Dunford and Abramowicz, Tina Chancey, Annalisa Pappano, Patricia Halverson (Chatham Baroque), and Margaret Little (Les Voix humaines).

Arthur Haas went to Paris in 1975 to do musicological dissertation research on a grant from the Alliance française and ended up taking the top prize in an international harpsichord competition soon after he arrived. “My whole life changed around. My life, which was supposed to be studying in the library all year, ended up being one of concertizing and starting to build a performance career.”

Haas gave a concert at Versailles and did a tour on antique harpsichords with William Christie. He joined The Five Centuries Ensemble and ended up staying in Paris until 1983, when he returned to the States to take a teaching position at Eastman, continuing to perform as a recitalist and as a chamber musician in groups such as the Aulos Ensemble. Haas’s experiences in Paris recall the exciting era when early music was a field of wide-open exploration – which wasn’t lost on French players. “The French early music scene at that time was one of great turmoil, and I mean that in the best sense,” he says.

“There was a willingness to accept new ideas. Sophisticated performance practices such as notes inégales, tempo flexibility, rubato – which were really not happening to that extent in Germany, England, or the States – were happening and being discussed in France. Performers were not afraid to take risks with these ideas or with very obscure repertoire. Scott Ross, for example, the American harpsichordist making his career in France at that time, built up a cult following for his exciting and unorthodox performances and recordings. Other than in the Low Countries, things were more staid and traditional in the rest of Europe. Spain and Italy hadn’t been bitten by the early music bug yet, and Germany and the East were still too tied to stricter ways of playing. The French students who were coming along then – Pierre Hantaï and Christophe Rousset, for example – are now leaders in the world of early music.”

Also enjoying a long relationship with Paris, Joel Cohen has a studio flat in Montmartre with the French-born soprano and Medieval specialist Anne Azéma, his wife. “It’s not only great for getting to concerts, but you can get great coffee and croissants, too,” he boasts. “It’s 20 minutes to the Louvre.”

From this side of the ocean, it’s easy to idealize the European cultural scene. As far as early music is concerned, “There is much more going on in France,” Cummings grants. “That said, it is not all of high quality, nor is it necessarily as historically informed as one might imagine.” Still, there’s no substitute for the tangible resources of the old world. “Being a 10-minute bicycle ride from the National Archives or one hour from Versailles isn’t too bad,” Dunford attests.

“Of course it’s thrilling to be able to play in places where our repertoire would originally have been heard,” says gambist Julia Griffin. After taking up the viol during work towards her musicology doctorate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Griffin later had the chance to study with Christophe Coin during an academic sabbatical in Paris. “I met other musicians more easily than I could have imagined, starting with those gravitating around Judith Kraft’s viol workshop.” Griffin moved to Paris in 1989 and currently enjoys a thriving career as a chamber musician; she is also a tenured professor of the viol at the
École Nationale de Musique et Dance in Issy-les-Moulineaux. “It seems easier here to combine teaching viol and doing concerts not only in France, but throughout Europe.”

Études

Kraft notes that the geography of Europe, with dense urban populations within easy reach of one another, has made it easier for performers of early music to create their audiences. “In the U.S., early music often developed in universities, often in small towns spread over great distances.” She associates this localized development with university funding, in contrast with the government support that is more available in Europe.

Money also curtails the perspective that North Americans are able to form about early music performance overseas. With the U.S. and Canadian dollars so weak against the euro, it can be difficult to entice European groups to cross the ocean to perform here. Even if they want to come, working visas can be difficult to obtain, and flying is often prohibitively frustrating since the World Trade Center attacks.

American expatriates have a valuable perspective on French early music culture, and they are able to comment on the especially French circumstances that shape the scene. Perhaps most striking to an American is the French music education system, since we have nothing comparable here. Public music schools – “not free,” says Kraft, “but heavily subsidized by towns, regions, or the state” – make music lessons available to the populace.

Early instruments first appeared in the curricula 30 years ago, starting with the recorder and the harpsichord. Other instruments followed; Kraft reports that around 70 music schools, most of them public, now offer viol classes. One of the first was started in the late 1970s in Angoulême by Martha McGaughey, while Haas, her husband, started the harpsichord class. “Early music is a breath of fresh air in what has been a rather stifling music education system with little place for amateurs and a heavy emphasis on solfège and tests. When I first got here, kids had to go through two years of solfège before they could touch an instrument! Even now, they have half an hour of instrument instruction and one and a half hours of solfège.”

In her conservatory post, Griffin teaches students from preschool to retirement age. Other than the nation’s two top-level music schools, “the official figure is that three percent of the students go on to professional careers. I’ve had a higher percentage among my students, with four who are active teachers and players.

“The conservatory system is not perfect, but the fact that music is available to a large population is enormously advantageous to the spread of early music, in creating an informed public and talented amateurs, and in producing more young professionals.”

Kraft adds, “Half of my customers weren’t even born when I started making viols. It is very stimulating to meet so many musicians in their early 20s who have been studying early instruments for over 10 years.”

Médiéval et multiculturel

Paris has special resonance for Medievalists. In the period referred to today as “the High Middle Ages,” the city was not only a capital of university culture but also – as the brochure of a new Medieval music graduate program at the Sorbonne puts it – “the world center for musical theory, performance, and the creation of liturgical polyphony.” Benjamin Bagby co-founded the program in 2005 with Katarina Livljanic, who directs the chant ensemble Dialogos and is also Bagby’s wife. “Katariina had already been teaching a Medieval music performance class at the Sorbonne for several years, and I had given a few guest lecture-demos, so we were already known to the administration. It was the music/musicology department which decided to push for approval of the master’s program,” during a recent Europe-wide restructuring of university programs.

In addition to studying repertoire, performance practice, and 12th- and 13th-century manuscripts and language, students in the program take classes in Medieval studies and produce an original performance practice research paper. The program sets out to redress what Bagby decries as “generally a huge disconnect between musicology and performance” throughout the international world of Medieval music-making. Even though historians possess nuanced knowledge about the contexts and
specific performance practices of distinct Medieval music periods and styles, performers continue “resorting to the worn-out clichés passed down in our own modern ‘oral tradition,’” he says. “In an effort to compete commercially with the more mainstream early music genres, Medieval music gets stuck in a shallow ‘drums and fun’ category.”

He continues, “The main change I have noticed in my 33 years of living in Europe has been the transformation of Baroque music from ‘early music’ into an important element of the cultural mainstream. The remainder of ‘early music,’ especially Medieval music, wasn’t swept along by this dynamic process.” The marginalization of Medieval music becomes a vicious cycle, Bagby notes, because “young performers will be drawn to other repertoires as they consider the cold, hard realities of making a career.

“If you had asked me, when our ensemble started back in 1977, I would have confidently predicted that by 2007 there would be serious schools dedicated to the study of Medieval performance practice, cutting edge ensembles working with the most innovative musicologists, offbeat festivals presenting the work of young performers, regular presentations of Medieval music-theater at the highest level, large and informed and demanding audiences, and a vocal-arts culture which would bring Western liturgical chant back in all its magnificent virtuosity.”

He notes that all these things have indeed come to pass, if on a much smaller scale, but that performers need to deepen their understanding of the repertoire if they want to grow. “Both performers and teachers will have to become more specific.”

Cohen echoes Bagby’s call for interdisciplinary knowledge. “Something that’s missing from scholarship is practitioners and scholars learning from each other,” he says. His own answer to the problem is the creation of a nascent institute for cross-cultural musical understanding in the context of Medieval Spanish music (see *EMAG*, Winter 2006). Cohen has secured in-kind support from the municipality of Chaville and is seeking financial backing for the program. He envisions conferences to bring historians and performers together to explore topics such as “Arabo-Andalusian musical and poetic forms in relation to Medieval European musical practices,” as well as practical courses for musicians from each tradition to experience the music of the other.

Dunford also recognizes a trend towards multiculturalism. “The ‘pure’ early music movement of the ’70s has now been replaced by concerts of, for example, half Chinese music and half old European music, as with Jean-Christophe Frisch’s group XVIII-21, with whom I’ve participated for the last four years. The scene nowadays is getting more and more ‘world music’ or ‘mixture’ conscious. That is probably to do with the globalization of our 21st-century world.”

**Financement des arts**

The other element of French musical culture that is strikingly different from the U.S. – and indeed from some of Europe as well – is its system for funding musicians. As Cohen puts it, “The government has inherited the role of the king, who used to surround himself with poets and musicians and artists because that was part of his function to the nation. In France they decapitated the king, but they didn’t kill the idea of maintaining music for the public. When Rostropovich died, it was on the front page of every paper. Mass culture exists in France as much as in America, but it doesn’t threaten artistic culture.”

As a concrete result of the cultural value placed on music-making, an elaborate network of government funding gives direct support to many musicians. “The whole system is much more sane than in the U.S.,” Cummings observes, “and does actually allow many people to pursue music as a profession.”

Arthur Haas recounts how “during the Mitterand years – now known as a golden age of French support for the arts – if you had an idea for a concert, recording, or project of some sort, you could get a fair hearing for it, and there was a good chance that you could get support for it.” Even today, Cohen says, “it’s much easier to do weird things there” than within American funding limitations.
What’s their natural activity? The tide of privatization sweeping many of Europe’s institutions has also washed away some French arts funding.

“We’re relying more and more on private financing,” says Griffin. That’s not all bad, she concedes, since it encourages less well-established ensembles to get creative as they try to connect with sponsors and audiences. Still, it creates unease: “We’re at a crossroads here.”

“Overall, the state of performance music is pretty dire,” she notes. “In France, you’re talking about having no money to bring in and not have any money to come back with.”

In America the leader of the orchestra would say, “First violins – bad intonation!” In England she would say, “Did I perhaps play a bit sharp in bar five?” One time, in the middle of a recording, one of my colleagues asked me if I wanted a cup of tea. I didn’t, so I said (Americanly), “No thanks,” and went on practicing. She got in her car and left for five hours. What she meant to say (Britishly) was, “We have a big problem with the interpretation of the rondeau – stop everything now and discuss it!” I lived in England for 12 years; the first three I spent musing and assessing meanings, going backwards to try to get in the door that way, like Alice in Wonderland. Unless you learn to do a ballet with words, people will smile slightly and dismiss you as being too crass to deal with.

In Germany they do not mind directness, but they may dismiss you on other grounds, and they will probably not smile.

I don’t know what Japanese audiences make of American musicians. You play, you bow, the audience bows. You bow again, they bow back. One time I had to ask the Japanese sponsor if he thought the audience liked the concert at all, as I really could not tell. He was surprised that I didn’t know. “Oh yes!”, he said. “They crapped!”

Of course, for every stereotypical national characteristic, you will find many examples that do not fit. One should not make assumptions from the outset, but it is quite interesting to collect impressions that can form a pattern over time. The fact that I dare to write about this at all is distinctly American of me!

I have only ever received the most genteel treatment in France – but I have also been told there that only French people may ever play French music. Many times sponsors or agents in France tell artists that foreigners could not possibly acquire the rafinesse necessary to play Couperin.

Once I had some concerts with a very famous French musician. This person was extremely refined and elegant; the truth is, I was a little bit intimidated about doing the Right Thing in company with him and all the other extremely refined and elegant French musicians in the group. When we went out to restaurants after playing, I would watch carefully out of the corner of my eye to check which of the tiny 17 forks one should use for each single bite of exquisite food placed in golden-mean alignment on an enormous plate.

The concert was in a castle somewhere in the French countryside, and it turned out to be quite near the home of The Musician’s ancient aunt. He proposed that we take tea with her. She must have been a countess or something – the setting and general tone of the event were akin to being invited to Windsor Castle. I believe there were servants. I was handed an eggshell-china cup with a fiddly handle that one couldn’t get hold of properly and balanced the plate with a single petit-four on my knee. The conversation was genteel to the point of an art form; every tone was modulated. The music of speech was a wonder to me.

All that week, The Musician and I had been carrying on a silent fencing match as to who could be more delicate. I’d been holding my own until the aristocratic tea party, but after that he won, hands down. I always wondered if I had said something Frenchly untoward to his auntie. We never performed together again. —Mitzi Meyerson

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exception in Europe,” says Dunford, and then he makes reference to the right-wing Nicolas Sarkozy’s presidential victory in May. “Let’s hope that the new French government won’t put a bitter end to all of this.”

La troisième culture

Getting funded is only one challenge. Musicians also have to build working relationships with colleagues, and it’s hard to break in as an outsider. “Nearly everything in France operates based on personal relations,” Cummings says. “The challenge at first lies in integrating into the fairly insular community of musicians living in Paris. There are many musicians who come through and many who even stay for a year or so, and the established early music community here isn’t very open to these people. It takes a while to convince people that you are here for good. Once you start working with groups based in France, things start to fall into place.”

Dunford agrees that “it takes years to ‘prove’ your worthiness. On the other hand, only very few French people really delve into archives and such, and therefore we Americans are often revered.”

Beyond the personal satisfaction of gaining a foothold to earn one’s livelihood, there is a sense that the new world has proven that it has something to offer to the old. “I do wonder how far early music would have gone here without William Christie.”

Kraft recalls the time when her wood supplier decided to convene a meeting of viol makers at his sawmill in the Jura mountains, along the French-Swiss border. “We drew up a list of participants, from Germany, England, Holland, Italy, and France. The two ‘French’ luthiers were Marcelo Ardizzone – originally from Argentina – and myself.”

When the Boston Camerata celebrated its 50th anniversary two seasons ago, Cohen arranged celebratory performances not only at the Boston Early Music Festival, but also in Paris. “There they were at the Théâtre de la Ville singing us ‘Happy Birthday’ – in English. This was at the height of the opposition to the American actions in Iraq. It was very clear that that opposition was never anti-Americanism per se, but a more specific criticism. We’ve always been very warmly welcomed here. You could compare it to what happened to the jazz musicians who came to Paris in the early 20th century. American players like Coleman Hawkins would say, ‘Oh, they take us seriously here.’”

“Let’s hope,” offers Bagby, “that the North Americans living here help to remind their European colleagues that some very interesting work is being done overseas in the land of ‘le Coca-Cola’

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“I think we help Europeans realize that, despite politics, America is still part of the family of nations in the cultural arena.”

– Joel Cohen

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and ‘les hamburgers.’” Cohen mentions the Boston Camerata’s frequent European visits, including an upcoming tour in France. “I think we help Europeans realize that, despite politics, America is still part of the family of nations in the cultural arena.”

“The effect that Americans have on the early music scene in Paris is proportionately quite large,” Cummings attests. “The same could be said for other foreigners living here. There is often a higher level of passion and commitment with the foreigners in comparison to their French counterparts.”

Perhaps the immigrants’ intensity comes in part from having to stake a claim on the repertoire itself. “I always feel when most French performers play French early music they are playing ‘their own’ music. It’s in their blood,” Dunford avers. That sense of heritage might be empowering – or it might be constricting. “Maybe if I had been born here, I would have the impression of dealing with my personal history, with the music of my ancestors,” Kraft muses. “That might make it even more challenging!”

The perspective of an adoptive citizen can be both liberating and lonely. Dunford seems to invoke the notion of the “third culture” when he describes the experience of being an expatriate. “We feel part of something we left and something we discovered collectively. The few of us who have been here for 10 or 20 years, or longer, sort of feel we should live somewhere on an island in the middle of the Atlantic. We are neither completely French nor quite 100% American any more, and we certainly are happy when we bump into one another in an ensemble or at a concert.”

“Love took me to Paris…. Sainte-Colombe was our common language.”
– Jonathan Dunford

For Bagby, it’s an issue not just of personal connection, but also of artistic stimulation. “The main challenge is keeping in close contact with both sides of the pond. But then a musician in Boston might say the same thing about keeping in touch with the scene in the Bay Area. Musicians still depend entirely on physical presence for our work to be truly collaborative, and keeping that collaboration alive and healthy is a huge challenge.” Today’s air travel hassles have only increased the challenge.

But the difficulties don’t deter these performers either from living in Europe or from maintaining their connections to the States. “Like most American expatriate musicians,” Bagby continues, “my basic orientation is European with a fair amount of trans-Atlantic travel and work, both teaching and performing, in North America. The world has become very small.”

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