



Photos by Bruce Dale and Michael G. Stewart

MARVEL IN THE

Hesperus musicians Grant Herreid, Priscilla Herreid, Tina Chancey, and Nell Snaidas are shown performing a live accompaniment to the 1923 silent film *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The ensemble will do so again at the 2019 Madison Early Music Festival.

MIDWEST:

MADISON EARLY MUSIC FESTIVAL

By KYLE MACMILLAN

When soprano Cheryl Bensman-Rowe and bass-baritone Paul Rowe decided in August 1999 to establish a summer festival devoted to early music in Madison, Wisconsin, the city of some 250,000 inhabitants had two things going for it: a major university with a picturesque lakefront campus and proximity to the substantial population centers of Milwaukee and Chicago.

In addition, the Midwest had no comparable event, so the field was open. “We just thought it was a perfect location, and the facilities were great,” said Bensman-Rowe, a Grammy Award winner in 1999 with Steve Reich and Musicians. “And we had a lot of contacts in the world of early music, so we thought we would try it.”

But Madison was hardly an early-music mecca, and, indeed, most residents probably didn’t know anything about the specialized field. Put simply, it was a big risk. The couple moved ahead anyway, recruiting Chelcy Bowles, who taught in the University of Wisconsin’s Division of Continuing Education, as a co-founder and the festival’s program director (essentially executive director). And the threesome’s initiative has clearly paid off. From July 6-13, the Madison Early Music Festival will mark its 20th-anniversary season.

“It went fast,” Bensman-Rowe said, “and it’s a happy surprise that it’s been so successful. A lot of nice things have happened because of it. We’ve had students who have come who really didn’t know much about early music, and now they have careers in early

music.” Bowles is amazed by how the event has been able to build a stand-out profile in a city flush with festivals of all kinds. “The community has really, really embraced this festival,” she said.

The summer event established itself as one of this country’s most important early-music festivals by differentiating itself right from the start. Not only is it situated away from the two coasts, where similar offerings are mostly found, but it also focuses mainly on medieval and Renaissance music and not the more prominent Baroque era.

While other festivals might offer some of the components available in Madison, few if any present a concert series with national and international early-music performers who in turn

serve as artists who also lead workshops for everyone from beginners to pre-professionals. It’s a formula the Rows instituted at the beginning and have continued all along. “If that were to change very much,” Bowles said, “it wouldn’t be the same festival.”

It also doesn’t hurt that the festival takes place at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in partnership with its Mead Witter School of Music. The university provides both



Photo by Katrin Talbot

Madison Early Music Festival founders Cheryl Bensman-Rowe and Paul Rowe



Photo by Katrin Talbot

Piffaro artistic co-director Robert Wiemken

fine facilities, such as the 700-seat Mills Concert Hall, where most concerts take place, as well as a handsome campus that includes the historic Memorial Union, with its beers, bratwursts, and terrace seating overlooking Lake Mendota. “I don’t know of any other university in the country where they encourage you to sit by a lake and drink beer,” said lutenist Grant Herreid, who first performed at the festival in 2002 as a member of Philadelphia-based Piffaro. “So, the setting is really pretty cool.”

Also cited by returnees to the festival is its unusual sense of community, which is generated in large part by the festival’s distinctive mix of students, teachers, amateurs, and professionals, who are

encouraged to commingle as much as possible. Heightening this collegial feeling is the All-Festival Choir and Orchestra, which Sarah Marty, program director since 2015, calls the “jewel in our crown.”

All the teachers and students involved in the workshops, which reached maximum capacity in 2018, are required to take part in the ensemble. It is composed of 60 or so vocalists and an assortment of instruments including violas da gamba, recorders, and lutes. Herreid oversaw the ensemble the last three seasons, and he will take on the task again in 2019. “Grant is able to figure out how to include everybody of all levels and all the instruments and voices,” Bensman-Rowe said. “It just makes things very special.”

Rehearsals are held every day, and the event culminates with the all-festival concert, which this year is titled *Musical Postcards from the Grand Tour*. “It’s a pretty amazing opportunity,” said Marty, a singer who also teaches arts management at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, “to get a chance to be next to some of these faculty members, to have your section leader be someone who has won

a Grammy or has performed with a group like Piffaro.”

Liza Malamut, a nationally known exponent of the sackbut, an early form of the trombone, is a big fan of the festival, especially its consistency. “It’s kind of magical that way,” she said. “It has a quality to it that is really constant, and I think it’s the location, too.” She first came to the festival in 2006, when she discovered Spanish Renaissance composers she had never heard of, such as Francisco Guerrero and Cristóbal de Morales, and met other students who have become friends and colleagues. While a trombone major at the Eastman School of Music, Malamut took a few lessons with noted sackbut player Greg Ingles, who recommended she try out the festival. “It was, honestly, transformative,” said Malamut, who returned to Madison last year as a faculty member and performer. “It was a concentrated week of learning everything and anything about early music. It really did change the course of my life.”

When the festival began in 2000, it spanned two weeks, but organizers quickly realized that was too much. So, in the third season, they pared it back

to one concentrated week, giving each festival a theme that ties all of the concert and educational offerings together, such as *The Glories of 17th-Century Venice* in 2004 and *El Nuevo Mundo—The Age of Exploration in the New World* in 2011. “We’re academics,” Bensman-Rowe said with a laugh. “We just like the way it pulls all the elements together. When you pick a theme, it’s fascinating. You get the idea, and the arteries that go out are really interesting to see how it encompasses things through history and musical activity.”

The 20th-anniversary season will revolve around the noted travel writer Thomas Coryat, who penned a 1611 book titled *Coryat’s Crudities* that chronicled a journey he undertook to France, Italy, and Germany, much of it on foot. The volume helped popularize what came to be known as the “Grand Tour,” a kind of *de rigueur* trip across Europe for upper-class young men. The concert series will feature music from places along Coryat’s itinerary, and daily lectures will cover related literature and other cross-genre topics. “I thought it would be a fun way to not be in just one place,” Bensman-Rowe said. “Like last year, for

instance, we were in Germany. This way, the ‘Grand Tour’ is pretty wide open.”

The festival has presented four esteemed touring ensembles and solo artists each year, including Dutch recorder player Marion Verbruggen and Quicksilver. These concerts were such a success at the beginning that organizers sometimes ran out of printed programs. “We just got this rolling, and it took off immediately,” Bowles said. “We

Milwaukee rents a bus each year to bring some of its fans to one of the concerts.

The 2019 lineup will feature *Wanderlust*, showcasing the San Francisco-based Dark Horse Consort; *American in Versailles*, an original ballet masque of French Baroque music with the Alchymy Viols from Indianapolis and dancer Sarah Edgar; Virginia-based Hesperus providing live accompaniment to the 1923 silent film

possible are both the festival’s free access to facilities on the University of Wisconsin campus—“It’s huge,” Bensman-Rowe said of that perquisite—as well as a shift in its administrative structure in 2014, a year before Bowles retired. During much of its history, the festival operated under the auspices of the Division of Continuing Education, but Bensman-Rowe worked to move it to the Division of the Arts, which has



The San Francisco-based ensemble Dark Horse Consort will perform during the 2019 festival



The Madison Early Music Festival's 2018 All-Festival Orchestra

were actually kind of shocked, and for a couple of years, we were unprepared for how the community supported it.”

The concerts now typically draw about 450 people, with luminaries like Anonymous 4 attracting even bigger crowds. The audiences are composed of local residents and people taking part in the workshops, as well attendees who come from Chicago, Minneapolis, and even beyond. Early Music Now in

The Hunchback of Notre Dame; and *Faith and Madness*, a program presented by Calmus, a vocal quintet from Leipzig, Germany.

The festival’s annual budget has grown from around \$60,000 in 1999 to \$120,000 in 2019, with most of the funds covering the part-time salaries of the three directors and the fees of the visiting artists and teachers. What helps make this relatively modest budget

staff to assist the festival with such essentials as marketing, graphic design, and website management.

“Everything got much easier,” Bowles said, “because all the work was spread out—the administrative aspects were spread over many people in the Division of the Arts.”

In the festival’s first year, 29 people took part in classes the first week and 22 the second. Now, about 120 beginners

to pre-professionals from as far away as New York and Massachusetts participate in the 40 classes ranging in 2019 from *Beginning Viol* to *The Notre Dame School and the Rise of Polyphony*. Participants check in Saturday morning, take part in the all-festival concert rehearsal that evening, and attend classes Sunday through Thursday, beginning each day at 9 a.m., before ending the week with participant concerts on Friday and the all-festival concert the following Saturday evening.

One of the festival's most popular workshops is the *Advanced Loud Band Intensive*, which is taught by Robert Wiemken, Piffaro's artistic co-director. "Loud band" is a Renaissance term that was used to describe an ensemble composed of reeds and brass—the most popular configuration of that time—that would perform everywhere, from royal courts to cathedrals. There was not a place in the United States for top-level amateurs and pre-professionals to pursue professional-level studies in loud-band performance, so

Wiemken, who also serves as an artistic adviser to the festival, started the Intensive in 2014. "It's been very successful," he said. "I've been drawing from as far away as Basel in Switzerland and Canada and the West Coast. So, we've been able to attract a high-level player."

Programs like the *Advanced Loud Band Intensive* have helped the festival boost the number of its students younger than 30, who now make up 25-30 percent of its participants. Among them is baritone Daniel Koplit, 22, who completed his undergraduate degree in vocal performance in May at UW-Madison. When he first attended as a sophomore and served as an administrative intern, the festival opened his eyes to the world of early music, something he had hardly explored in his regular classes. He has since founded Aperi Animam, a 12-member vocal ensemble in Milwaukee focusing on the Renaissance. He plans to attend graduate school in the fall of 2020 and earn his doctorate in musicology. "I don't know if I would be where I am today without the

festival," he said. "I didn't even know that I could have a career in this until I was there witnessing people professionally doing this."

Bowles, who serves on the festival's advisory board, is not surprised that the Madison Early Music Festival is celebrating its 20th anniversary, and she assigns much of the credit to the Rowes. "We have fantastic artistic directors," she said, "and they just have a lot of insight. They just know how to do things." Wiemken agreed, describing the couple as inviting, warm, and knowledgeable. "They have been just wonderful to work with," he said. "They kind of set a general tone for the festival that is encouraging to people."

While the Rowes have no plans to retire any time soon, Bowles said, they have begun contemplating a succession plan. However it plays out, she believes the festival's distinctive structure and record of success should allow it to thrive for at least another 20 years.

For further information about the 2019 edition of the Madison Early Music Festival, go to madisonearlymusic.org

Kyle MacMillan served as the classical music critic for the Denver Post from 2000 through 2011. He is now a freelance journalist in Chicago, where he contributes regularly to the Chicago Sun-Times and Modern Luxury and writes for such national publications as the Wall Street Journal, Opera News, Chamber Music, and Early Music America.



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