

# EMAg

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## What's Wagner doing here?

*(hint: ask his mastersingers)*

Remembering Frans Brüggen

Just Intonation in Cambridge

Early Meets New

Chicago Snapshot

# Francis Liu

*As a youngster growing up in Princeton Junction, New Jersey, Francis Liu followed in his sister's footsteps and took up violin. It wasn't until high school that he learned about baroque violin, and in college he came into the orbit of musicians steeped in baroque style, including Kenneth Goldsmith at Rice University and Kenneth Slowik at the University of Maryland.*

*Liu went on to study at the Oberlin Baroque Performance Institute and in the*

## **HOW MUCH OF A CHALLENGE IS IT TO SWITCH FROM MODERN VIOLIN TO BAROQUE, AND VICE VERSA?**

It can be difficult. It's really a question of listening to the instrument and figuring out what it wants to do well.



Photo by Nicholas Frankel

*Historical Performance program at the Juilliard School. An artist of eclectic tastes, Liu, 30, has played with many early-music ensembles and is co-founder and artistic director—along with baroque oboist Lindsay McIntosh, also a graduate of Juilliard's HP program—of New Vintage Baroque, which programs old and contemporary music.*

*EMAg caught up with Liu between summer engagements at the Utrecht Festival and elsewhere in Europe.*

## **WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO BECOME IMMERSSED IN EARLY MUSIC AFTER YEARS AS A MODERN VIOLINIST?**

It's in my DNA, and I'd always explored the style of it. I just had never dabbled with the equipment. Somehow, I feel this is just a natural evolution, rather being a convert. I kind of like to see it as a spectrum of playing.

I feel it's sort of like driving a nimble sports car vs. an SUV. Baroque violin is very nimble. You focus a lot on articulation and the speech and the consonances and vowels of how you speak with each note. With modern violin, there's the sustained line and power and the skill in controlling that. Obviously, the bow is a bigger part of that, almost more than the instrument.

## **WHAT MOTIVATED YOU AND LINDSAY MCINTOSH TO CREATE NEW VINTAGE BAROQUE [IN AUGUST 2013]?**

We sort of became fascinated with the idea that with baroque music and any kind of genre, there is the culture of the performance itself. With baroque music, you immediately think it's going to be in a church. It's stereotyped to maybe an older audience. We're more



interested in trying to find a way to explore programming that would be able to combine all the music and to have the audience relate to us through the pieces.

### HOW HAVE YOU STRUCTURED PROGRAMS?

We got together with Doug Balliett, a composer and double bass player who runs the Brothers Balliett. He wears lots of hats. He does a lot of contemporary music and a lot of baroque music, and he was in the [Juilliard] academy. He's a great person to have be our MC. We decided to go with the format of a baroque variety show. We have a topic or a story and then we cobble together various

instrumental pieces, arias, and choruses, or whatever, so that there's a lot of variety. In between sets of pieces, Doug will talk.

### WHO WERE YOUR PRINCIPAL TEACHERS AT JUILLIARD?

Monica Huggett and Cynthia Roberts. Robert Mealy is director [of the HP program] and he offers a signup—any instrumentalist can play for him. He's very

generous. The program is very busy and in a lot of ways it is essentially a professional orchestra. It's funny. It's an educational program, but because it's young and there's money and we're in the spotlight a bit, they expect people to live up to expectations. For me, that's a great way of getting very practical experience.

### PRACTICAL IN WHAT SENSE?

The great conundrum is that on the educational side, you do the treatises and think critically and try to second-guess yourself at

all times, because you're trying to create something new and old. On the other side, does it even work as a musical experience or a performance experience? Do audiences really care? A friend says it's kind of like making sausage. You like eating sausage, but you probably don't want to know what goes into making it. Juilliard was great in that respect. You have your classes and your training and all that stuff. But then, oh well, we're rehearsing three programs at the same time. You've got to get this to sound good.

### ALONG WITH YOUR TEACHERS AT JUILLIARD, YOU'VE HAD THE CHANCE TO WORK WITH EMINENT GUEST ARTISTS. HOW HAVE THOSE ENCOUNTERS BEEN BENEFICIAL?

You get to experience the gamut of interpretive styles in the baroque movement. William Christie comes through. Jordi Savall. Richard Egarr. Christie took on the role of mentor. He invites alumni to come to his gardens in southern France. A number of concerts are scheduled, and you're asked to bring ideas for outdoor afternoon concerts. We also get to work with the Les Arts [Florissants] musicians. It's really great. You get to hang out in beautiful gardens and eat great food. You almost feel a little guilty.

### HOW MUCH JUGGLING DO YOU ENVISION IN YOUR CAREER IN TERMS OF OLD AND NEW MUSIC?

I'm itching to play contemporary music again and explore that part of my life. A lot of my gigging will be baroque because of the people I know.

It's kind of hilarious.

There are people I know from before starting Juilliard who say, "Oh, you're a baroque violinist now. That's your thing?" Yeah, but it's still just me. ■



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