



BAROQUE PRACTICE

Early Music Ensembles in Minnesota A Spring/Summer 2022 Season Preview

by Charles Asch

Now that live performances have returned in 2021-2022, there are many “early music” ensembles performing in concerts throughout Minnesota! These concerts are for anyone entranced by the acoustic beauty of music of the Renaissance, Baroque and Early Classical periods, and come highly recommended for any musician, music student or orchestra director.

The term “early music” is used as a shorthand for ensembles that specialize in performing music of the 500s–1700s that originated in Western Europe. The focus of most ensembles of this type is on music of the 1500s–late 1700s, roughly from John Dowland to George Frideric Handel. Typically, the music of Mozart, Haydn or Beethoven is not performed by these ensembles, as this would require differing specialization and instrumentation. Instead, the focus is on composers such as J.S. Bach, Antonio Vivaldi, Claudio Monteverdi, Georg Philipp Telemann and much more.

Minnesota has over six organizations specialized in Baroque repertoire performed on period instruments, or modern replicas thereof. With performances throughout the state, these ensembles include Lyra Baroque Orchestra, The Bach Society of Minnesota, Le Grande Bande and Bach Roots Festival. There are also two Minnesota-based early music ensembles that also delve into works of Renaissance period (c. 1500-1600s), the Mirandola Ensemble and Consortium Carissimi.

A student or music-lover attending these concerts might be intrigued by the differences in both the instruments and performance techniques used by these ensembles. The string instruments are strung with gut strings, which were the standard for all string instruments until roughly the 1930s, after which a gradual transition to steel strings began. The wind instruments are of a different make than contemporary wind instruments, with different materials, timbres and playing techniques. Both the wind and string instruments are pitched a semitone lower, with $A=415$, rather than

440. This pitch is based upon an organ design from 1722 in Dresden’s central Catholic church, pitched to $A=415$ (though pitch varied even more during the 1700s from $A=392$ to Handel’s tuning fork at $A=422.5$!). Both the differences in materials of the instruments and the lower tuning pitch result in a difference in sound and texture from contemporary instrumental setups. One of the most obvious differences, is that cellists in these ensembles generally do not use endpins, as these were not used frequently by cellists until the late 1800s. Mary Sorlie noted in her prior MNSOTA article on baroque bows, how the bows used in these ensembles differ as well, having a convex rather than concave shape.

In addition to the differences in the instruments themselves, there are differences in technique, articulation and phrasing that contribute to the texture of the music. The techniques used to play the wind instruments differ greatly from modern instruments, with players performing on the baroque bassoons, oboes and brass instruments having to have significant additional training to be able to play their forbearers by a few centuries.

String players in early music ensembles have similar additional training to play their instruments, as the response of gut strings differs greatly from the response of steel strings. In addition to differences in construction, the Baroque bow is held differently, based upon surviving evidence from historical treatises of the 1700s that indicate the bow was held further from the frog, rather than at the frog. These traditions of playing music from the 1600s–1700s in this way were revived during the early music revival of 1960s–’80s, where developments in bow hold and instrumental design that had been ongoing since the 1800s were anachronistically reversed based upon historical evidence, in order to perform music of the 1700s using techniques and instruments more similar to those used by players of the time.

This tradition of rediscovery is evolving,

and often finds differences amongst players and ensembles as to the precise means of performing music of a particular time period. For several years in the Twin Cities, there has been a program dedicated to the development of these skills, the Twin Cities Early Music Festival, which brings together opportunities for learning and performing for students and experts in this field from all over the world.

The Twin Cities Early Music Festival is anticipated for Summer 2022, and has been occurring for several years in St. Paul and Minneapolis. The festival is described as performances from “early music specialists” that “aim to recreate the sound-worlds of earlier times through the use of period instruments and techniques,” that “brings together singers and musicians from Minnesota and beyond who specialize in the performance of music from the Medieval through Classical period.” This is certainly something for people to put on their calendars for Summer 2022 once the performance schedule is posted (tcearlymusic.org), but in the meantime, here are a few other selected performances throughout Minnesota from early music ensembles, presented in the order of selected performances. Each ensemble has other performance beyond what is listed here for 2022; take this list as starting point for encouraging students, friends and teachers to get out there and enjoy live music from these historically-informed ensembles! While the majority of these performances are in the Twin Cities, early music ensembles are increasingly performing throughout Minnesota for concerts and educational outreach. Many of the ensembles below are available for educational outreach in the classrooms as well:

Mirandola Ensemble <https://www.themirandolaensemble.org>, a “Minneapolis, Minnesota-based professional choral ensemble dedicated to promoting the highest standards of choral music, the idea of choral music as ‘high art’ in the Western tradition, and the aesthetics of the Renaissance.”

Cantate Domino: Music of the Venetian Renaissance—in collaboration with Incantare and the Augsburg University Choir

- March 26, 2022, 7:30 P.M., Augsburg University, Minneapolis, MN
- March 27, 2022, 2:30 P.M., Annunciation Church, Minneapolis, MN

Consortium Carissimi <https://consortiumcarissimi.org>, “founded in 1996 with the intent of uncovering and bringing to modern day ears the long-forgotten Italian-Roman sacred and secular music of the 16th and 17th century through voice and historically informed instruments.”

Miserere: Music for Holy Week

- April 8, 2022, 7:30 P.M., Olivet Congregational Church, St. Paul, MN
- April 9, 2022, 7:30 P.M. St. Matthew’s Catholic Church, St. Paul, MN
- April 11, 2022, 7:30 P.M., Shattuck-St. Mary’s School, Faribault, MN
- April 12, 2022, 7:00 P.M., Saint Paul Cathedral

Bach Society of Minnesota <https://bachsocietymn.org>, “formed in 1832 by University of Minnesota students wanting to sing the works of J.S. Bach,” is “the oldest Bach Society in the US.”

Flowers & Stars: BWV 182 Himmel-skönig, sei willkommen by J.S. Bach and Vocal Music from Renaissance and Baroque Composers of Latin America

- April 10, 2022, 4:00 P.M., Ted Mann Concert Hall, University of Minnesota

The **Lyra Baroque Orchestra** <https://lyrabaroque.org> “brings a rare freshness, color, and dimension to the glorious music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through its performances on period instruments.”

Vivaldi and His French Friends with Maria Jette, soprano, and Immanuel Davis, traverso

- April 23, 2022, 5:30 & 7:30 P.M., Sundin Hall, St. Paul, MN

- April 24, 2022, 3:00 & 5:00 P.M., Mount Olive Lutheran Church, Rochester, MN

La Grande Bande <https://lagrandebande.org>, “strives to present innovative and inspiring musical programs right in the heart of southern-Minnesota farm country:”

Court Entertainments

- May 20, 2022, 7:30 P.M., Arlington Haus Too, 147 Main Street, Arlington, MN
- May 22, 2022, 3:00 P.M., St. Mary’s Cathedral, St. Cloud, MN

Cellist Charles Asch has performed with Lyra Baroque Orchestra and MN Opera. His teaching expertise is in helping beginning cellists establish their proper form and playing style. He has taught at UMN-Morris, UWisc-River Falls, and MacPhail Center. †