

# Interview with William Christie, Director

Les Arts Florissants

*Jeffrey Sandborg*

For those familiar with the repertoire of the French Baroque and for anyone just beginning to explore it, all roads lead to William Christie and Les Arts Florissants. Christie and his choral-instrumental ensemble, which he founded over thirty years ago, are credited for the renaissance of this body of colorful, varied, but still largely neglected literature.

Under Christie's direction, LAF's formidable discography comprises nearly 80 recordings spanning the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and focusing especially on *tragedie-lyrique*, opera-ballet, motet, as well as the principal genres of the English and Italian Baroque. His work as a musicologist has resulted in an immense collection of performance editions that have contributed to the body of this music now available to performers.

Born in 1944, Christie was educated at Harvard with postgraduate study at Yale. He began his musical career as a harpsichordist but is today known more as a scholar, teacher and, of course, as a conductor. His dedication to the development of young singers is in evidence with his *Jardins des Voix* based in Caen and, more recently through his appointment at the Juilliard School in New York. William Christie's work has been underwritten by the French Government in recognition of his inestimable contributions to that country's culture and promotion of it abroad. He was awarded

the Légion d'honneur in 1993 and was elected to the Académie de Beaux Arts in 2008.

I sat down with Maestro Christie in New York during his run at the Metropolitan Opera with *Enchanted Island*. Our conversation ranged from performance practice issues to sources for useful performance editions. I was especially interested to know his thoughts on how this repertoire might be introduced to those unfamiliar with it.



*Les Arts Florissants* © Philippe Matsas

## **Les Arts Florissants**

**Jeffrey Sandborg:** Please describe for our readers how LAF came to be.

**William Christie:** Well, we began life as a vocal ensemble back in '78, '79. It was a mixture of predominantly French but some American and English singers. The aim was to form a small performing group of eight to ten voices with a few instruments. We wanted to take a critical look at composers

who were being sung then, like Monteverdi or Purcell, but also to defend the little guy who wasn't being performed, and then to take a very hard, critical look at French music, since we were living in France. We wondered what was happening to French music and why wasn't it being sung or played? Was it because people just weren't doing it the right way? Of course that was the answer. So, from that moment the group has grown into a standing orchestra and choir.

### **Total forces of LAF**

**JS** You mentioned that you started with eight to ten. What are the forces today?

**WC** I have probably about one hundred who sing in the choir and then I have a pool of about one hundred who play in the orchestra. Of the hundred in each category we have maybe fifteen to twenty who are regulars. But they're all independent freelancers. And I'm constantly replenishing the group, as well.

**JS** Is it fair to say that your numbers are driven by the project?

**WC** Obviously. If I'm doing a *Missa Solemnis* or a Haydn *Seasons*, we're using a lot of people.

**JS** From where do your singers and instrumentalists come?

**WC** They're all freelancers which means that every time someone sings or plays there is a contract. Everyone is a professional. There are some who might divide their time between me and my outfit and some of the other big Baroque ensembles in Europe; so they might travel off to England to do a concert with Jiggy (John Eliot Gardiner) or Trevor Pinnock, or they might go up to Amsterdam to work with Ton Koopman. My musicians are very loyal – some of them have been with me

for fifteen to twenty years, but they're all freelance. Then the soloists are constantly being renewed. But we do keep some whom we love for a very long time. I'm still working with singers who came in as big soloists ten, fifteen years ago. Some like David Daniels, for example, or Joyce di Donato.

**JS** When it comes to voices, what types are you seeking?

**WC** There is repertory that you simply have to do with extremely virtuosic voices but I'm also working with repertory which needs young voices; a lot of that being French or Italian. I don't want to hear an old thrush singing Purcell, frankly. Some of the big sacred pieces of Monteverdi seem to work better with younger voices, as does a Charpentier oratorio. With very few exceptions, obviously, we're dealing with *bel canto* voices, which is to say that they've got good coloratura, and they're lighter voices than you choose to sing Gilda or other nineteenth-century repertory. And we must constantly replenish them.

### ***Jardins des Voix***

**WC** With my *Jardins des Voix*, every other year we listen to several hundred voices and then from them we choose between six and ten people. They go through a training program for about a month and then we sell concerts that we fashion around them all around the world. These people have to be younger than thirty which means that it's a wonderful way of replenishing.

One of the aspects of this is that part of the art of singing is being able to sing with somebody else. In the concerts that we present with them there are duos, sextets and so on, ensembles in which people are being called upon to be intelligent, informed solo singers but also ensemble singers.

**JS** What do you mean by 'training'?

**WC** Very simply, we've got the voices which might be two basses, two tenors, a marvelous female mezzo, perhaps a falsetto singer and two sopranos. And then I fashion repertory that I think is going to be good for them. Of course it's all completely unknown to them. So we put them through their paces and they learn how to sing this repertoire.



*Les Arts Florissants © Guy Vivien*

### **Audition process**

**JS** Please describe the audition for these young singers.

**WC** Obviously, we're dealing with specialized repertory so I look for someone who has a good voice, a beautiful voice, and technique of course. Then I listen for the commitment. Do they really like this stuff? That's what struck me as being unfortunate with the auditions this last time around. A lot of these kids had just jumped on the band wagon. They thought

it would be a way to get off to Europe and start their careers but they had no more interest in Handel and Vivaldi or Bach than they did for anything else. In fact, when you read the CVs you could tell they're more at ease singing repertory from the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

**JS** Do you have them read?

**WC** No. I won't do anything that puts them on the spot but you can tell very quickly who the bright ones are.

**JS** Are you working toward a particular sound or do you let the repertoire determine it?

**WC** We have very particular sound. It has to do with language and with my particular way of looking at pieces. When you sing Italian music of the early seventeenth century it's not, obviously, the same way you sing Italian music of the eighteenth century. You don't sing Rameau the same way you sing Bouzignac. I'm guided by language and style.

## **Challenges**

**JS** The renaissance of music of the French Baroque seems not to have extended to these shores. In addition to a case of being 'out of sight, out of mind,' there are hurdles any director might face; the availability of reliable editions, performance practice issues, and especially the vocal dispositions combine to make this repertoire more challenging than others.

**WC** What you're saying about the challenges is quite true, I think. For example, if you might say to a university or professional choir, "Look, we're going to do a *grand motet* of Rameau. Well, that's hard stuff in the sense that you've got to have soloists, a fairly big choir and you've got to have an orchestra. Then there is the question of the market for this

music.

**JS** So if you're going to all of that trouble and expense, you might as well do Handel for more predictable box office.

**WC** Yeah. That's exactly right. You know, in the States there is a necessity to please. Let's face it, I know with respect to symphony orchestras in town, that had great traditions for symphonic music, having to do *Star Wars* suites to please the person who's paying. That's one of the great dilemmas we have in the States. And there's also the fact that tastes change. But the French repertory is always going to present a number of problems. It's a particular style of music where you're going to have to do some homework.

## **Editions**

**JS** In terms of such homework, I've found it difficult to get scores and parts for what might have seemed to be easy, like Handel oratorios. I would think, then, that a Rameau *grand motet* would require even more tenacity.

**WC** It all starts with library work and access to good libraries is really essential. Everything was published way back in the 1860s by Chrysander. Now the *Neue Händel-Gesellschaft* (Bärenreiter) has been doing good things. Some of it's still to be done. There are operas and oratorios that haven't been dealt with yet.

**JS** Clearly there is a need for accurate, modern editions. What do you do when they are not available? Do you make your own?

**WC** Very often, yes. I do all the parts myself. I have a vast library, possibly one of the best in the world when it comes to performing editions. It's been built up over the past thirty-five years or so.

**JS** So, you've been making editions all of these decades?

**WC** From the very beginning. What we're doing now is cleaning up a lot of the Handel. I'm doing a new edition of the *Belshazzar* which desperately needs to be done.

**JS** And who are your particular publishers?

**WC** We are our own publishers. So you can just go to our website and you'll see that many of these big choral works have already been published.

**JS** If someone wanted to do a French Baroque festival, would your website be a reasonable resource?

**WC** Yes, and this happens fairly often. Sometimes we'll get a request for a set of parts to be hired, or asking if a set of parts may be hired, or if there are options to a fifty-piece orchestra, or a choir of fifty.

**JS** Is this sort of musicological work what led you into conducting?

**WC** No, but we were up against the necessity of having to prepare our own material because there wasn't any. But now, thirty years later, we use facsimiles a lot. Times have changed, thank God.

## **Recommendations**

**JS** Beyond your discography, please share a few recommendations for the exploration of some of this eighteenth-century French literature.

**WC** There are lots of things for female choirs, immense amounts of repertory with divided soprano and sometimes divided alto. In France they wouldn't call them alti, you'd call them *bas dessus*. And there's lots of luscious stuff there. Small



motets, some very beautiful pieces by Charpentier, for example. If you like this repertory, I think the thing to do is to get these composers' catalogues of their works. There is a vast amount of music being republished – Stradella, Scarlatti, Rossi, Monteverdi – some of it in very good publications. And there's an amazing repertory for choirs starting way back in the seventeenth century with fabulous pieces by people like Bouzinac, Lalande, Charpentier, and for every conceivable combination.

**JS** Along those lines is the repertoire of, say, the early French Baroque as flexible as other music of the period, boiled down to a continuo, for example?

**WC** Well, you can do a lot of the stuff with reduced forces but there's a point of no return and you begin to lose the reason behind it.

**JS** You risk losing the 'grand' in *grand motet*?

**WC** Exactly.

**JS** You've mentioned some particular voice types like *bas dessus*, and there are others like *hautes-contre*. Surely getting these sorts of voices is one of the potential obstacles for the performance of this kind of music.

**WC** Yes, and it is a difficult problem. There are particular styles of voices that the French have been using for a very long time, especially their use of high tenors called *hautes-contre*. The sopranos are *dessus*. In a texture we'd call SATB you'd have top line soprano, then two intermediate lines, one of high tenors, *hautes-contre*, one of low tenors, and the basses.

Essentially, to do this stuff properly you don't have female altos. You might have some soprano lines that are divided. And finding tenors who can sing this repertory can be tricky.

**JS** Can the high tenor be replaced with a male falsetto sound?

**WC** If there is no other option, yes, but it's not really what you want to do. Of course there are other performance practice problems like pitch and temperament. It's hard to do this stuff with modern instruments because, often, it's very high.

**JS** So, what is your frequency for concert A?

**WC** Well, when I record these pieces or when I'm recording a French opera of the late 17<sup>th</sup> or early 18<sup>th</sup> century we're dealing with A one whole tone down from modern A.



*William Christie © Denis Rouvre*

## **Repertoire**

**JS** I'm impressed by the breadth of your discography which represents some composers previously unknown to me; Mondonville for example. How do you go about unearthing all of this interesting music?

**WC** I've been in early music all my life. I started out doing contemporary music and I let that go. But if part of your aesthetic is doing unknown pieces well, very simply you've got to be in the library. You've got to know good musicologists. For Italian music I know Howard Smithers very well. I knew some of the big Monteverdi scholars, Tom Walker, Ron Curtis and for the French repertory I've known lots and lots of people. We still have things that we transcribed years ago that have not yet been published.

**JS** And someone like Mondonville? Where is the market for someone so obscure?

**WC** One way to answer that is to see where the record sales are. Or, since we have an important library someone might hear, say, the Mondonville *grand motet* or oratorio, and they write to Les Arts Florissants asking if they may have the performing parts. Well, the Mondonville has been selling over the past ten or so years all over, in Sweden, Germany, what have you. It's hard music to sing but it's spectacular, very powerful stuff.

## **Juilliard**

**JS** Tell me about this new program in early music at Juilliard.

**WC** It's the big buzz. Now that Juilliard has committed to early music and historical performance, I think the early music scene is going to change here in New York in the next few years. I've been an artist in residence at Juilliard since 2007. We have a faculty now of strings, keyboard, flute, bassoon, oboe and trumpet. Right now the voices we're using are coming out of the vocal department. There again, we've got some marvelous vocal teachers who are very excited about us because it means they can plug their students into some good Gluck, good Bach and Handel, Monteverdi, and they know we're not going to do anything injurious to the voices.

And it's a great relief for them that there is something other than singing Verdi and Wagner.

## **Understanding Performance Practice**

**JS** What advice do you have for conductors who might want to take on some of the challenges of this repertory but might be intimidated by performance practice questions that need answering?

**WC** Get recordings. That's a very good way of learning. On that basis you can decide how many people you're going to need, what the voice types are going to be. I think most of us doing this kind of music are pretty much in agreement about many of these things.

**JS** Is that an efficient way to become acquainted with varieties of ornamentation, too?

**WC** Certainly. I think recordings are a very good tool and I have no objection whatsoever. And you can tell a good recording from a recording made by someone who doesn't know what he's doing.

**JS** Well, authentic period ornamentation can be daunting even for a singer.

**WC** Almost everywhere, you're close to some institution that will have a musicologist or resident performer who can give options.

**JS** Anything you'd like to add that might be useful to choral directors?

**WC** It comes down to a question of curiosity and love. If you love the stuff, if you fall under its spell then you're going to make an effort to sell it or produce it, or convince others to. That's what it's all about, essentially.

## Sources

Toward the end of exploring music of the French Baroque more fully, the interested reader might begin with some of the sources listed below.

- The Les Arts Florissants archives, located in the LAF offices in Paris, contains thousands of scores accumulated over thirty years. Toward the promotion of French culture, much of this collection including orchestral parts is available through rental and sales. It is organized by composer and may be accessed through Arts Flo Media: <http://www.artsflomedia.com/>
- Christie recommends that those wishing to discover treasures for themselves examine some of the catalogues of Baroque composers. A few worth mentioning are:
- *Marc-Antoine Charpentier*, Amadeus Press, 1995. Catherine Cessac's comprehensive examination of Charpentier's oeuvre including the entire catalogue of the composer's 550 works.
- *Thematic Catalogue of the Works of Michel-Richard de Lalande: (1657-1726)*, OXFORD University Press, 2005. In this catalogue, Lionel Sawkins provides over 3,000 music examples, details of performing requirements, sources, as well as with comprehensive indexes and thematic locators. <http://lionelsawkins.co.uk/>

Many works lie hidden but can be accessed for examination, acquisition and hire through institutions like the Centre de Musique baroque de Versailles (<http://www.cmbv.fr/> ) and the Bibliothèque Nationale's Gallica website (<http://gallica.bnf.fr/> ).

Finally, the website for Les Arts Florissants, offers contacts and information about the ensemble:  
<http://www.arts-florissants.com/site/accueil.php4>