

# Florilegium: the first 20 years

Reprint of an article written by Ashley Solomon for the programme of the 20th anniversary concerts at Wigmore Hall, held on 2nd and 3rd July 2011.

Welcome to our 20th anniversary weekend celebrations at Wigmore Hall. Several years ago I began thinking about this anniversary season and how best to celebrate this milestone. The programme choice seemed quite obvious, as did the venue. From our launch concert in July 1991 at Blackheath Concert Halls, where Bach featured quite prominently in the programme, to our ongoing relationship with Wigmore Hall since our debut here in 1992, we have steadily worked through much of Bach's sacred and secular small scale works. As a culmination of our Ensemble in Residence here in 2000, we presented a six concert series exclusively featuring the music of Bach. It therefore seemed only appropriate to present the complete Brandenburg Concertos and Orchestral Suites over a weekend together with a few arias from his cantatas that we have enjoyed performing over the years.

Neal Peres Da Costa and I met in 1990 while I was studying at the Royal Academy of Music and he was just completing his course at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama. At that time we had a number of friends and colleagues also completing their studies in London who were all considering the next step. As performing opportunities with the established period instrument ensembles were rare, our aim was to set up an ensemble with this current generation of baroque players to perform chamber and orchestral repertoire.

There was a tremendous amount of support and enthusiasm for this venture from our colleagues, and our first concert took place at Blackheath Concert Halls on 13 July 1991 with sixteen players. The programme included both chamber and orchestral works, was far too long, but attracted a substantial audience, including a number of our professors who encouraged us to continue with this. Our philosophy was always to remain a flexible ensemble with a fixed core so we wouldn't be restricted in the repertoire we could perform.

Aware of the need to organise a demo tape to promote Florilegium, and with limited resources, we reduced our forces to seven players and recorded a chamber concerto by Telemann, which Anthony Halstead produced for us in a church in north London. The initial line up included myself (recorder), Rachel Podger and Anna McDonald (violins), Daniel Yeadon (cello), Elizabeth Kenny and William Carter (theorbo/baroque guitar) and Neal Peres Da Costa (harpsichord).

Neal had sent our demo tape to a producer he knew who worked for the



1991 core players: (l-r) Daniel Yeadon, Ashley Solomon, Neal Peres Da Costa, Rachel Podger

Dutch record label Channel Classics, but it was over six months before the producer made contact with us. Having heard our recording he was keen to get in touch with us but had misplaced the accompanying letter with our details, and therefore had no way of contacting us. Six months after receiving the tape he was cleaning behind his desk and came across the letter, called Neal late that same night and offered us our first recording. Within 3 months we were recording our debut CD of music by Telemann in Bad Homburg in Germany. This disc was released to critical acclaim in early 1993, awarded a Diapason d'Or and Choc de la Musique in France, and 19 years and 23 CDs later we are still recording with Channel Classics.

Despite winning the Dutch Early Music Competition in Utrecht, and being runners-up in the Swedish Baroque Competition in Malmo in 1992 concerts came quite slowly in the first few years. However, by 1993 we had over fifty concerts, helped in no small part by the seven-week tour of Australia six of us undertook, organised by Neal's mother, Cynthia, who until then had no previous experience as an impresario. This tour not only included concerts but also radio and TV appearances and school workshops. From 1994-1997 we held residencies for both the South East Music Scheme and the John Tunnell Trust in Scotland, which secured a healthy number of concerts each season in the UK, and enabled us to build up numerous concert programmes with different chamber formations from four to eight players.



CPE Bach recording photo, 1997

One of the biggest coups for us was being offered the position of Ensemble in Residence at London's Wigmore Hall from 1998-2000 by the Director William Lyne. The Hall had always had string quartets in Residence, but we were the first baroque ensemble to be given this honour, enabling us to present between three and six concerts each season which were promoted and sponsored by the Hall. In addition we became very actively involved in the Hall's growing education programme. This Residency culminated in 2000 with the six concert series celebrating the 250th anniversary of the death of J.S. Bach. Each concert had a similar formula – a Brandenburg Concerto, an Orchestral Suite and two cantatas. In addition we performed the Art of Fugue, the Musical Offering, a number of instrumental concertos and were joined by singers including Emma Kirkby, Deborah York, Sally Bruce-Payne, Julian Podger, Roderick Williams and Thomas Guthrie.

Keen to also explore larger-scale passions and oratorios by composers including Bach, Handel, Vivaldi and Purcell, we established the Florilegium Choir, which was initially directed by Julian Podger (1994-2000). After a break of nearly six years I re-launched the choir in 2006 under David Hill, who has been directing these larger scale productions ever since, mainly in France and Germany. Our initial collaboration with David was in 1994 when he was Director of Music at Winchester Cathedral. We continue to join the Winchester Cathedral choir and the Waynflete Singers for their large productions of passions and oratorios at Easter and Christmas each year. Since 2001 we have regularly worked with David and The Bach Choir in their annual performances of the St. Matthew Passion, also the St. John Passion and B Minor Mass at the Royal Festival Hall and the Royal Albert Hall.



David Hill with the Florilegium Choir, Fontainebleau, France, 2006

Over the years we have enjoyed collaborations with a number of choirs including Kings College Cambridge Choir (Stephen Cleobury), Trinity College Cambridge (Richard Marlow) and I Fagiolini (Robert Hollingworth) taking productions to Istanbul, The Canary Islands, France, Germany and Spain.

We have also always enjoyed our projects with soloists and some of the more regular collaborations have included performances with Robin Blaze, Catherine Bott, Michael Chance, Lucy Crowe, Julia Gooding, Emma Kirkby, Andrew Manze, Derek Lee Ragin, Elin Manahan Thomas, Roderick Williams, Pieter Wispelwey and Johannette Zomer.



March 2010, with Emma Kirkby and Robin Blaze, Ourense, Spain

One of our most exciting projects in recent years has been our work in Bolivia, which has been well-documented over the nine years since we took a European baroque programme to the Fifth International Festival of Renaissance and Baroque Music in Santa Cruz. Following this first performance in the festival in April 2002 we have made three award winning CDs and been involved in each subsequent festival presenting unique programmes from the archives held in the Mission Churches of the Chiquitos and Moxos Indians. Initially working with four Bolivian soloists who I trained for our first project, I am now delighted that Arakaendar Bolivia, the national choir I founded in Bolivia (2005), tours both nationally and internationally, promotes the rich cultural heritage that Bolivia has, and has an active membership of close to forty singers. Our projects have been the subject of a "60 Minutes" documentary for the American CBS channel, the Dutch TV network as well as radio programmes across Europe and the Americas. New repertoire is still emerging from archives in the Missions and my work continues in collaboration with Father Piotr Nawrot and the Association for Art and Culture (APAC) in Bolivia. For many years these activities were also supported by the Prince Claus Foundation in The Netherlands.



With the Arakaendar Bolivia Choir, Concepcion, Bolivia, 2006



January 2010, with four Bolivian singers, Singapore

In addition to training the native singers in Bolivia, since 2009 I have also been working with instrumentalists, recently purchasing a number of baroque string instruments and bows for them to play on. Eventually we hope to have a Bolivian baroque orchestra to accompany Arakaendar Bolivia. These projects have not been exclusive to Bolivia and we have presented these programmes in the UK, Germany, Turkey, France, Spain, Italy, Holland, North and South America and, most recently, in Singapore.



July 2008, concert for the annual summer school, Prachatice, Czech Republic

Educational work has always been an important area for Florilegium and we were delighted to have been appointed Ensemble in Association at the Royal College of Music in 2008. The appointment, which was originally for two years, had the aim of continuing the promotion of historically informed approaches to baroque and classical repertoire already begun since the establishment of the Historical Performance department in September 2006. Florilegium gave one performance each term with some of the more advanced students, as well as frequent masterclasses on 18<sup>th</sup> century baroque repertoire and large-scale themed projects. At the end of the two years, it was decided that the group should maintain their association, and give five coaching sessions each term on 18<sup>th</sup> century repertoire.

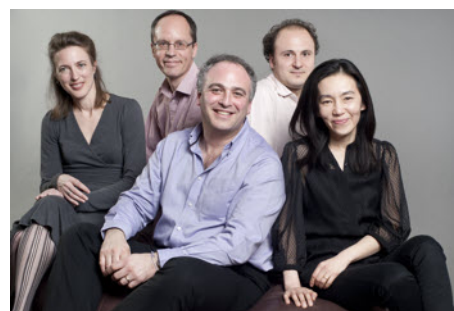


Zadar, Croatia, July 2007

Over these first 20 years Florilegium have had some outstanding leaders and principal players who have included violinists Rachel Podger, Lucy Russell, Kati Debretzeni, Rodolfo Richter and our current leader Bojan Cicic. In 2001, and after 10 years with Florilegium, co-founders Neal Peres Da Costa (harpsichord/fortepiano) and Daniel Yeadon (cello/viola da gamba) left the group to move to Australia. At our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary concert at Wigmore Hall in July 2001 we welcomed James Johnstone (harpsichord/fortepiano), Jennifer Morsches (cello) and Reiko Ichise (viola da gamba) as new principal players. Following these two celebratory concerts James will be leaving the ensemble to pursue other musical interests. In the last ten years he has made a tremendous contribution to Florilegium on CD recordings and in live concerts, and I would like to thank him publicly for his invaluable support as a colleague and friend. I take this opportunity to announce that Terence Charlston has been appointed as our principal keyboard player and will be taking over from James.

In Florilegium's first 20 years we have given more than 750 performances, in forty-five countries. Over sixty of these performances have been here at Wigmore Hall. I am delighted to be sharing this celebratory weekend with so many colleagues, both present and past and sincerely hope you enjoy these concerts.

Ashley Solomon  
Co-Founder and Director of Florilegium



Left: 2001 core players: (l-r) James Johnstone, Jennifer Morsches, Reiko Ichise, Ashley Solomon, Kati Debretzeni

Above: 2011-12 principal players: (l-r) Jennifer Morsches, Terence Charlston, Ashley Solomon, Bojan Cicic, Reiko Ichise Photos: Amit Lennon