



COMPOSING ELECTRONIC MUSIC FOR BAROQUE INSTRUMENTS

Not all “early music” is performed at early music festivals. With the help of Baroque instruments and a laptop computer, *Les Folies D'Électronique* electronically reprocessed the old form of the folia at the Atlantic Music Festival

By Brandon Labadie

A recording of *Les Folies D'Électronique* made at the 2013 Atlantic Music Festival can be heard here: <https://soundcloud.com/brandonlabadieoboe/les-folies-d-lectronique>.

BEFORE MY ARRIVAL at the Atlantic Music Festival in Waterville, Maine, I had already decided that I wanted to write a folia, but one that combined live Baroque oboe and Baroque violin with electronically processed sounds, making my laptop a separate performer in the piece.

The creative process of taking a very well-known Baroque idiom and transforming it into a modern piece, while still holding true to the instruments, composers, and history behind the dance form, forced me to do a lot of research and explore various compositional techniques. I began by listening to various live performances of colleagues in the early music scene as well as analyzing manuscripts of pieces by Marais, Corelli, Vivaldi, and a few anonymous musicians from the 15th and 16th centuries.

Limited by my hardware—two microphones and one laptop—and by the two-week time-frame, I set out to compose 20 variations that used a distinct palette of electronics. In my experience, attempting to force too many electronic sounds or effects into a composition causes a lack of development and results in a smattering of disjointed, poorly implemented electronic sounds. That said, the computer was an equal contributor to my composition, *Les Folies D'Électroniques*. I used it to enhance harmonic texture, develop thematic material, and expand the audience's

preconceived notion of the sound space. Pitch shifting, ring modulation, delay lines, flanging, and a bit of source filtering were to be the electronic colors for my piece. At times, I felt that an effect was not necessarily enhancing the sound quality or the affect of the variation, so I left those entities as stand-alone acoustic variations—these provided the audience with an aural break from constantly processing new sounds and also reminded them of the formal folia structure.

After speaking with Juilliard faculty member, violinist, composer, and director of the Atlantic Music Festival's Future Music Lab program, Mari Kimura, I narrowed down my raw compositional choices to meter, harmony, and melody. Because the late folia has such a well-established chord progression (i-V-i-VII-III-VII-i-V/i-V-i-VII-III-VII-V[4-3sus]-i), I chose to stay true to these harmonies throughout each variation. But I gave myself permission to throw away at times any sense of rhythm or melody, and this allowed some beautiful moments to occur in the piece—two improvised solos and a few variations where the sense of meter decays over the 16-bar progression.

After the electronics and compositional aspects of the folia had been decided, I began to think more about the history of the folia. One of my favorite descriptions of the dance comes from the 15th-century writer Sebastián de Covarrubias

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in his *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* (Treasury of the Castilian or Spanish Language, 1611). He notes the very noisy musicians carrying tambourines and other instruments, with other young men disguised as women slung over their shoulders. He also says the term “folia” means “mad” or “empty-headed,” which he deemed appropriate since the dance was so fast and noisy the performers appeared insane. Later, the folia developed into something more stately, and a set form was codified

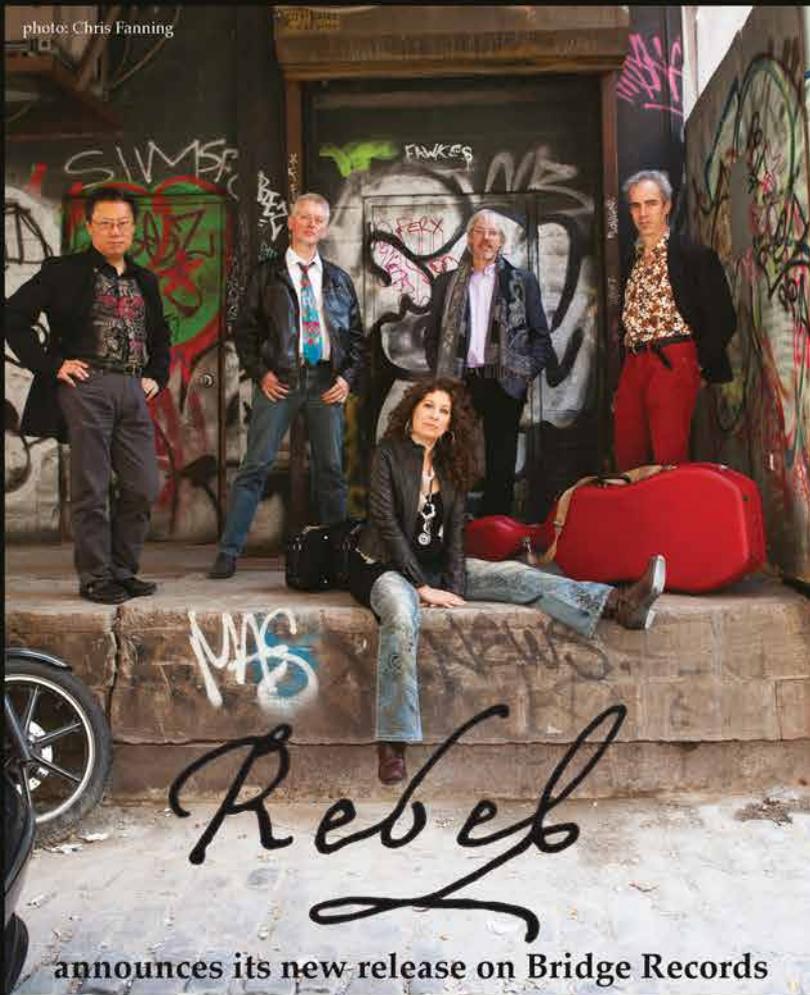
“Where do you go after this, and how far can you take Baroque music or period instruments into this electronic world?” I think answering that question has become an important goal for me as a composer and instrumentalist.

in France and Italy (also establishing the distinctive harmonic form mentioned above). With Sebastián’s words in mind, I decided to include a little bit of everything in my version, using the electronic processing to dismantle any preconceived historical notions among members of the audience.

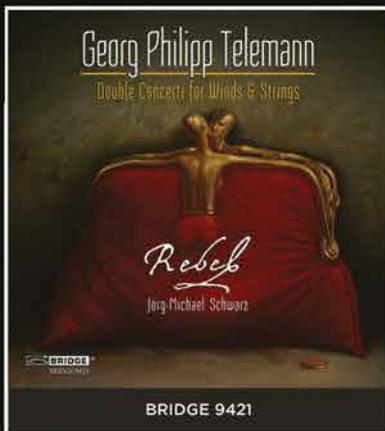
In the final week of preparation, I asked a colleague, Baroque violinist Jae-Won Bang, to rehearse bits and pieces of variations and have her record various extended techniques, so I could attempt to process them on my own in the laptop. This experience really opened my eyes to how necessary it is to have the acoustic instrument in front of you with an expert behind the wheel; I had found it increasingly difficult to conceptualize certain moments in the composition without being able to experiment with the instrument.

During this period, I also discovered which interactive processing techniques worked best with each instrument.

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Because of the instrument's spread overtones, reedier sound, and inconsistently veiled notes throughout its scale, chordal pitch-shifting on the Baroque oboe, for example, was much harder than on the violin. I did not stop tweaking and fixing bugs until the last minute before the performance. And I wrote and programmed a new variation the morning of the concert, which Jae-won and I rehearsed hours before the doors opened.

Although the rarified atmosphere of a summer music festival does not in any sense represent reality, this experience taught me that time for practice and for reflection about the music has to be built into the schedule when doing such a huge project like this; otherwise, performance aspects tend to suffer.

After the premiere, I came away with a better perspective on how I can use my skills as a performer-turned-programmer-turned-composer to further my capabilities on Baroque oboe as well as deepen my overall enjoyment of composing. Someone asked me after the performance, "What happens now? Where do you go after this, and how far can you take Baroque music or period instruments into this electronic world?" I didn't have an answer for him then, but I think answering that question has become an important goal for me as a composer and instrumentalist. How far can I take the Baroque oboe (or any Baroque instrument, for that matter) into this new world of sound processing and what new musical idioms will I discover along the way? 

American oboist Brandon Labadie (www.brandonlabadie.com) performs both modern and early music repertory. A graduate of the University of Colorado at Boulder and Juilliard's Historical Performance Program, he was recently named executive director of the Portland-based ensemble Musica Maestrale.

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