

James Wilson

HIP Chamber Musician

Chamber music as a genre consists of works that feature smaller ensembles; The Chamber Music Society of Central Virginia not only specializes in this genre of music but the organization also performs on period instruments. Does it take special training to approach music when being performed on an instrument specific to a certain era?

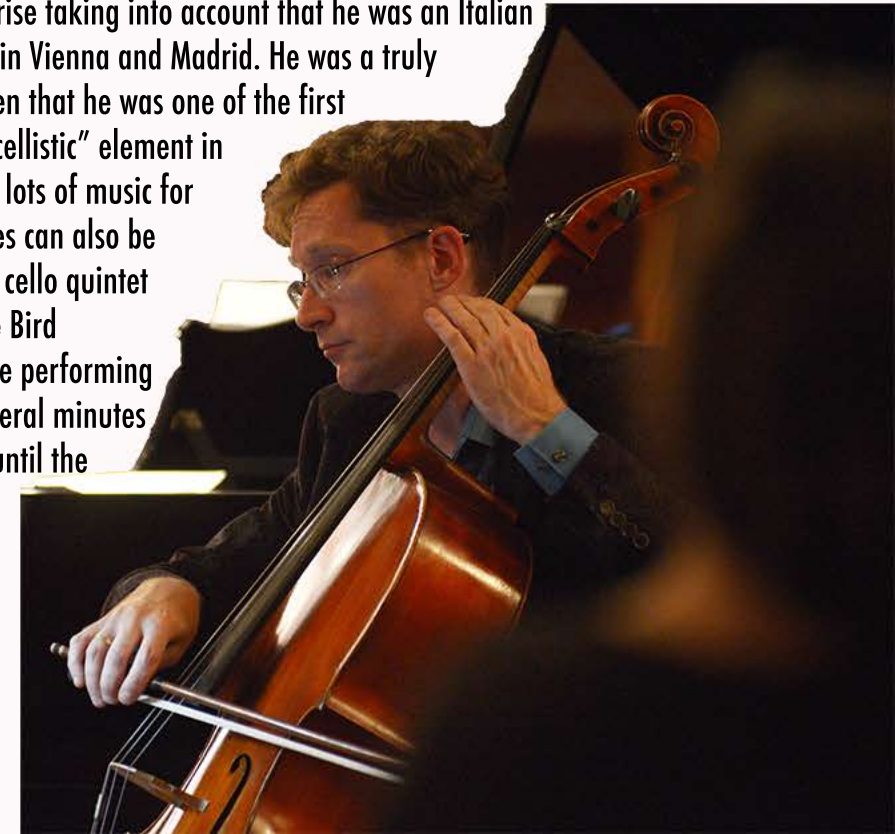
One thing that increasingly defines both the Society's artistic outlook and my personal interest in classical music is a commitment to "Historically Informed Performance" - also known in the music world as "HIP." For instance our October and April concerts feature music by Boccherini, Beethoven and Schubert. These were composers who were working decades apart but were both writing for instruments with almost the same historical set-up. So we'll be performing with gut strings instead of steel, on fortepiano instead of pianoforte, and some of us will even use different bows in different pieces. All of our Baroque music this season will be played on historically accurate instruments. In addition to the equipment, the musicians involved have to be able to combine historical knowledge with specific techniques appropriate to each historical period to achieve the "you are there" effect. Sometimes the difference between this approach and the normal performance standard is very subtle, and sometimes it's like night and day. But I'm a believer in this approach. It is something taken for granted now in Europe, and just starting to take hold in the USA, so I'm proud to be a HIP trend-setter for Richmond.



CMSCVA
chamber music society of central virginia
the beauty of few.

The first concert of the 2015 - 2016 season is titled "Boccherini 3, 4, 5." Luigi Boccherini was a composer as well as a cellist. As a cello player yourself does his music have a special quality that speaks to you or inspires you more than other composers?

Boccherini is often referred to as "Haydn's Wife," a really un-PC term that infers that his music is weak and decorous compared to Haydn. But that is a rather ignorant and old-fashioned viewpoint. I find Boccherini's music extravagant and sensuous, with loads of melodies and fascinating textures - like a rich brocade. That's no surprise taking into account that he was an Italian composer who worked both in Vienna and Madrid. He was a truly multi-cultural musician. Given that he was one of the first virtuoso cello soloists, the "cellistic" element in his work is also strong, with lots of music for solo cello. But these passages can also be surprising. For instance in a cello quintet called "L'Uccelleria" or "The Bird Sanctuary" (which we will be performing on October 3), there are several minutes of chirping violin passages until the two cellos break out and have a specular moment in duet. It's like they couldn't stand any longer to let the violins have the main voice. It's very funny, charming, and very Boccherini.



CMSCVA features world class musicians from all around the world. What is your process for selecting the musicians to come perform here in Richmond, VA? Are they friends and colleagues you've met over the years?

Most of the musicians who come to play in the Society as guest artists are people that I know and respect from collaborations over the years, or by reputation. Quality of musicianship and personality are key factors. But some of them are people I've never met or have never heard live. I am constantly surfing through the internet or asking friends for recommendations, all in search of strong musical voices. Take for instance Bryan Crumpler, who will be playing clarinet for us in February - I've yet to meet him in person, but was compelled to invite him because of his recordings and personal story as a musician.

It seems that the CMSCVA artists are pretty tight knit and share a history together; when you bring a new musician into the fold does it present certain challenges or does it merely provide a breath of fresh air?

Most festivals or Societies tend to stick with a small clique of musicians who appear annually together in concert. And we're no stranger to that approach! This is because music is really an interpersonal art - you want to play with people who you know and trust, and who will do well by your intent. However, CMSCVA does have a mission to include musicians who we feel need

a platform for performance, even if they aren't a "known" quantity to us or our audience. This tends to work extremely well.... but sometimes it doesn't! And sometimes the audience likes a musician that the other performers can't stand, or visa versa. Then we live and learn.... it's a constant editing process.

The Brandenburg Concertos by J.S. Bach are massive pieces that involve a large amount of musicians when it comes to chamber music standards. You've been wanting to program this music for a while, what made you decide that this was the year to do it?

Yes! I've been wanting to do the B'burgs for years. Unfortunately when programmed as a set the concertos require a huge amount of different instruments. Since we are committed to HIP, this includes 3 Baroque oboes, 2 natural horns, 2 violas da gamba, traverso flute, Baroque trumpet, violino piccolo (don't even ask!). For a concert series like ours, it would be a major investment. But this year we are presenting a glorious compromise. We'll be performing the 3 B'burg concertos that feature wind instruments - Baroque oboe, recorders, traverso flute and Baroque trumpet, along with strings and harpsichord. And to round off the concert, we'll include the wonderful B-minor orchestral suite that includes a solo traverso flute part. What is particularly exciting to me about this combination is that these are pieces written for what were in essence chamber music ensembles in Bach's time



If constraints such as time, money, or resources were not an issue, what would be your ideal music program?

As seasonal as it sounds, I would love to do a small-scale Baroque performance of Handel's "Messiah" oratorio, a piece that is so near and dear to my heart, and one that I feel is mistreated so often in concert. It would be ideal to present a performance that matches the intimacy and fervor of the text. Along those lines I would also be interested in performing Handel's "Theodora," again an oratorio with some of the most moving music in all Baroque music.

To contrast that, a cabaret-style performance of Schoenberg's "Pierrot Lunaire" would be fabulous, with a costumed singer portraying Pierrot (and the musicians masked behind a scrim). I would also love to present a screening with live music of the 1931 movie "Dracula" scored for string quartet by Philip Glass. There are so many musical things I would love to bring to life. But here's another reason I appreciate this question: When I think back on what we've presented over the years, it's really astonishing how many of my musical dreams I've seen come to life. How many people can say that?

