

Chamber Organ Inaugural Concert

Presented by Early Music
Vancouver

Sunday, July 22, 8:00pm
First Nations Longhouse,
UBC Campus
by Colin MacDonald

For twenty years the staff of Early Music Vancouver had planned to purchase a portable chamber and continuo organ for their organization. That dream was realized in the first concert of this year's Vancouver Early Music Festival, a program that celebrated a new instrument built by quebequois artisans Hellmuth Wolff & Associées.

Prior to the purchase of the new organ, chamber organs had to be rented from out of at great expense, forcing local programmers to carefully limit the repertoire that they chose. It's surprising that this new organ is being welcomed by a host of organizations in Vancouver, from small choirs to orchestras, to be used in early as well as contemporary music. The instrument itself was designed with an astounding flexibility in mind: it is quiet enough to accompany a single player, but can also be played by a soloist with orchestra, and it can be tuned to a wide range of pitch levels and intonation systems. Spokesman and lutenist Ray Nurse, and organist Doreen Oke were as excited as children on Christmas Day as they explained the chamber organ's potential, and it seemed to hold up in this small display of its features.

Oke introduced the audience to the new organ with solo repertoire by Girolamo Frescobaldi. The instrument has only been in the city for a week, so she was still learning the idiosyncrasies of the keyboard, but her enthusiasm made up for

some very minor note fumbles. The organ was bright and responsive in the quickly shifting *Toccata Quinta*, yet demonstrated an intimate and restrained sound in the *Toccata per L'Elevatione*. The purity of its tone gave a wonderful clarity to the music, and the highest register stops never became strident. The design of the air pump allowed notes to be sustained evenly without losing intensity, to the effect that harmonies had a brilliant resonance, particularly over a long pedal point.

Integrated into the newly christened string ensemble La Cetra, the organ revealed its design as a continuo instrument. Most chamber organs that are used with orchestras turn out to be too loud when they are required to accompany smaller groups, so this instrument was specifically crafted to work in more intimate settings. La Cetra, all playing on period instruments, has a naturally light and transparent sound, yet the organ's tone blended so completely with the strings that it was almost imperceptible, adding a rich depth to the harmonies.

An extra feature of the evening was the introduction of early cello specialist Laura Kramer, who played a Domenico Gabrieli *Sonata*, accompanied by the organ. A newcomer to Vancouver, Kramer's playing was agile and penetrating, and she will be a boon to the early music community.

More solos played by Darryl Nixon, and continuo work with the mixed instrumentation of the Burney Ensemble confirmed the new chamber organ's acceptance by these musicians. Other music organizations will soon be lining up to take advantage of this fine and much needed instrument.