

Pat O'Brien and the New York Continuo Collective

BY TONY ELITCHER AND GRANT HERREID

In 1996 three students—two neophyte harpists and a beginning lutenist—approached Pat O'Brien for a suggestion about ensemble playing opportunities. Pat suggested that they join Tom Zajac's Collegium Musicum at the Mannes School of Music. One of the two harpists was already a well-versed early music performer, Christa Patton, a talented early wind professional. The other was Andie Taras, a talented singer. The lute student was Tony Elitcher, a jazz saxophone player with no early music training. All three were seeking entrée into the early Baroque and were willing to take Pat's advice; he was never known to steer anyone wrong.

Tom's Collegium featured mostly 16th-century repertoire, which meant much plucking single-line polyphony. But every so often Tom would turn to the three and say, "In this spot I need some continuo." They would then go back to Pat, who would show them what to do for that portion of the music, which was sufficient for the purposes of the Collegium. This went on for several semesters: the recurring requests for continuo, the concomitant guidance from Pat.

Occasionally, most often when a Collegium concert was looming, Grant Herreid would come to a rehearsal to help Tom prepare the group. Grant would rehearse the little continuo section, polishing their efforts. This pattern continued for several semesters, the pluckers learning for the concerts, but not gaining significant knowledge or understanding about the process of realizing continuo accompaniments.

Then in 1998 came the watershed moment for the three pluckers and the genesis of the Continuo Collective. That summer they and others of Pat's students attended the Amherst Early Music Festival workshop, at which Grant Herreid directed his pastiche production of *Il Pastor Fido*, which featured the ravishing monody of Monteverdi, d'India, and others. Thrown into the continuo ocean, the pluckers struggled to stay afloat and came back to New York flush with enthusiasm and with the firm intention of having Pat teach them everything there was to know about basso continuo.

Pat's response was to suggest that they get together on their own, with some fairly simple tunes and a singer, and try to work things out for themselves, based on what they had learned so far. He said he had some other students he was sure would be interested. One of them, Baroque guitarist Reg Moncrieff, graciously invited them to meet in his living room.

At the first meeting nine players participated, including the harpist/singer Marcia Young, playing through some grounds and chord patterns supplied by Pat. Then the plucky group attempted to accompany Marcia singing "Folle ben," their edition of which had been transcribed without the incipit "F" as "Olle ben," which forever after was the Collective's theme song!

The second meeting collected three more to make the group an even dozen players. And when the third attracted eighteen people, it was clear that with this much growing interest, a larger space was needed to continue. At the time Pat's studio on Broadway and 31st Street in New York City had enough space to accommodate a large group of players. Pat invited the group to use the studio on Tuesday nights, an evening on which he did not teach. Even so, he declined to take on the central teaching role for the group. He suggested asking Grant to take on that job. Meanwhile, and in conjunction with the formative philosophy of what would become the New York Continuo Collective (NYCC), Pat began a separate grounds and dance form class, in order that the players establish proper playing technique and learn the principles of the fluid artistry that is basso continuo realization. This insistence on adherence to shapely playing became a bedrock principle of the Continuo Collective approach to Baroque accompaniment.



Figure 1. Pat (center) with the New York Continuo Collective.

In the ensuing life of the Collective, Pat remained an indispensable part of its teaching and coaching mission. The group grew in size, incorporating three or four theorbos, five or six lutes, a few Baroque guitars, one or two viols, a harpsichord, and usually a triple harp or two. Anywhere from half a dozen to around fifteen singers would take part. Pat was instrumental in shaping the continuo sound and assignments to accommodate such a large number of instruments. He developed ways to organize the collective “whoosh” of plucked and strummed notes. For example, on certain long notes, he had the harps or maybe the guitars begin their welling up of sound later than the lutes and theorbos, so that while the one sonority tailed off, the other would gently come to the fore, to let the listener experience a variety of sonorities, rather than one large expanse of sound. In other cases, the instruments acted as one great lute.

Pat was enthusiastic and knowledgeable about ensemble writing and arranging for plucked strings, having of course arranged many pieces for up to twenty lutes and other plucked strings for the “Three, Four, and Twenty Lutes” concert at the 1989 Boston Early Music Festival. Following his guidance, we usually included such ensemble music in our projects.

In each fall semester the Collective might focus on a particular print or composer, each singer taking charge of a solo, duet, or trio to rehearse with the group. Pat would typically sit or stand among the players as a song was being rehearsed, frequently interrupting, index finger raised in classical gesture, to remind us all to breathe with the singer, to complain that our cadences needed more taper, or to offer specific technical expertise on how to execute a strum, a rolling crescendo, or a particular style of arpeggio.



Figure 2. Pat playing theorbo with the New York Continuo Collective. Photo by Leah Nelson.

Many of the players studied privately with Pat, so he worked with them individually outside of NYCC sessions on their continuo playing. With his encyclopedic knowledge of original sources, he could demonstrate the sort of chord shape and arpeggio Girolamo Kapsberger might employ in a piece of Italian monody or the light finger strum at the end of a phrase in a French *air de cour*.

He carefully explained how to exploit the dissonances by exploring expressive chord shapes on each instrument. He could talk about finding the caesura in an Italian hendecasyllabic poetic line to understand the rhetorical impulse and accents of the text. He was known to demonstrate techniques of lute ensemble playing by referencing old guitar flat pickers or the twelve-bar blues.

For a time, Pat was performing regularly with Andrew Lawrence-King's Harp Consort, and his continuo coaching was influenced by the techniques and terminology that Andrew, Stephen Stubbs, and Paul O'Dette were promulgating in their teaching and in their professional ensembles: impulse chords, *messa di voce* arpeggios, etc. Pat would explain that early 17th-century continuo treatises are clear enough when describing *what* to play over a given bass note, but quite short on actual details of *how* to play, how to shape the harmonies, when to spread the chord, when and how to apply arpeggios, tremolos, etc., to support the affect of the voice. For example, he demonstrated how to accompany a vocal *messa di voce* (an expressive crescendo-decrescendo) with a kind of double arpeggio: use each of the fingers in turn, followed seamlessly by a gentle down-stroke of the thumb through the courses. One student remembers, "Pat reinforced for me how to consider historical sources as evidence and not rules, in particular how you could see things in the music that suggest practices that are not written down until later. And it's that idea of not having a complete record of historical practice that both gives one some license and requires one to be creative in performance."

Pat was a noted expert in reconstructing early guitar-strumming and -playing styles, and so when the Collective spent a semester exploring 17th-century Spanish music, Pat was all over it. He discussed his theories of reconstructing ensembles of guitars mentioned in literary sources: for example, how a simple *folia* notated in alfabetto "E" on one size (and pitch) of guitar related to the same ground notated in "O" played on another size of instrument, and how, by referencing sources for other Spanish instruments like the harp, one could build an entire improvisatory piece from a mere four or eight measures of guitar notation. With Pat's guidance we created musical renditions of some of the *folias* in Luis de Briçeno's *Metodo mui facilissimo* (Paris, 1626), songs for which Briçeno supplies text and chords but no melody or rhythm. Pat

supplied strumming patterns and delicate dynamic phrasing with which to accompany the traditional *folia* melodies.



Figure 3. Pat with Baroque guitar.

Having left the main directing role of the NYCC to Grant and others, Pat was nevertheless rarely known to miss a Tuesday night session, offering insight through his encyclopedic knowledge, experience, and ability to make far-ranging connections and comparisons to enhance understanding at the intersection of music, language, technique, culture, history, gastronomy, literature, and visual art. If this sounds overblown, one need only come to a Tuesday meeting of the Collective to experience the vestiges of Pat's influence. Pat embraced the Collective's philosophy of equal partnership between accompanists and soloists, and singers as well as players flocked to the Collective semester after semester. Pat, a center of gravity in the early music world, attracted to the Collective visiting dignitaries for master classes and workshops as well as permanent faculty to match and enhance Grant's leadership.



Figure 4. New York Continuo Collective rehearsal. Photo by Pat O'Brien.

While Pat's death left an enormous void, it led those of us who had been within his orbit to understand the responsibility he engendered within us. When the common response in confronting a seemingly unanswerable question had been, "Ask Pat," it became clear that we had all become repositories for some facet or nugget of Pat's wisdom, and that it is through Collective action that his legacy lives on. He shared his incredibly focused teaching skills and his breadth of knowledge to help individual players and singers recognize and navigate musical and rhetorical continuo situations as they came up in our sessions and to inspire us all with his deep understanding of music and life, often punctuated by his characteristic philosophical expression: "So there it is."



Figure 5. New York Continuo Collective rehearsal. Photo by Pat O'Brien.