

An Interview with Prof. Bathia Churgin in Honor of Beethoven's 250th Birthday

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Prof. Bathia Churgin

Professor Emerita Bathia Churgin, Israel's leading scholar in the field of Classical music, has dedicated her internationally acclaimed research to studies of the origins and development of eighteenth-century Classical music and the Classic Symphony, as manifested in the works of Giovanni Battista Sammartini (c.1700–75). Extending into the nineteenth century, her studies of Beethoven demonstrate how the composer's most daring innovations emerge from within the tradition of Classical music (see attached [List of publications](#)). In honor of Min-Ad's 17th issue, commemorating the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth, we thank Bathia for graciously sharing with us some of the highlights of her research. Moreover, as founder and head of the Department of Musicology (Music) at Bar-Ilan University, 1970–84, we thank her for sharing with us aspects of her academic and personal experiences.

AP: Do you remember how you first became interested in the origins of the Classical style?

BC: I dedicated many years of my scholarly work to writing my dissertation at Harvard University on Giovanni Battista Sammartini's 67 symphonies, and many others attributed to him. When I began looking for a dissertation topic, I followed my initial interest in Classical music and started reading whatever I could find about the development of the Classical style. I soon realized that we knew very little about the origins of the early Classical style. Yet, Sammartini's name often appears in conjunction with the development of the Classic Symphony. For this reason, the main objective of my dissertation was to explore and explain the simultaneous development of the Classical style and the Classic

Symphony. My thesis was indeed a pioneering study, as there was very little research done on these topics at the time, apart from one crucial article written by an Italian scholar, Fausto Torrefranca (1883–1955), during World War I, and some small Italian and French biographical works. My teachers at Harvard suggested that I contact Jan LaRue, the world expert on the Classic Symphony, to consult with him about my thesis. I promptly called him, and he enthusiastically supported the idea, calling it an “excellent topic,” and adding that there were some 125 symphonies ascribed to Sammartini. He suggested that I contact Newell Jenkins, the world expert in conducting early classical music, who had recently begun working on Sammartini. I called him just as he was about to leave for Europe. He told me that he was working on a thematic catalog of Sammartini's music, which he offered to send me, as well as copies of parts from several of Sammartini's symphonies. Years later, we jointly compiled the *Thematic Catalogue of the Works of Giovanni Battista Sammartini: Orchestral and Vocal Music* (pub. 1976). Looking back, I realize that these early contacts with Jan LaRue and Newell Jenkins marked turning points in my academic career and that, over time, we developed deep lifetime friendships.

As the next step, I wanted to study the existing sources of Sammartini's symphonies. I knew that copies of early symphony parts were in the Fonds Blancheton collection (1730s), housed in the Paris Bibliothèque Nationale, and that three autographs in Sammartini's hand could be found in Paris, at the Bibliothèque Nationale. The Fonds Blancheton collection also contained symphonies composed by the relatively obscure Italian composer Antonio Brioschi, whose works often are found together with Sammartini's.

Upon arriving in Paris, I began the tedious job of creating scores for the earliest symphonies. The scoring format was crucial as it provided me with a sense of the whole, and enabled me to assess the structure, texture, and relationship of the parts. From the beginning, the modernity of this early music, including many Classical features, captured my attention. Among these traits, especially noteworthy were structural variety, complete sonata forms, and a forward-looking harmonic and melodic language. Also, together with a group of friends, I organized live performances of the symphonies (I played the violin I part). All of us responded enthusiastically to the beauty of the music. Moreover, these works confirmed that the history of the Classic Symphony began much earlier than had been assumed, predating Haydn's earliest symphonies by nearly thirty years.

AP: Turning to your second area of expertise, when did you first develop a particular interest in Beethoven?

BC: I always loved Beethoven. By the time I finished High School, I knew all of the symphonies, and, in college, I became acquainted with all of the late quartets.

My academic research on Beethoven officially began when I taught at Vassar College. Teaching at Vassar was very stimulating, as Vassar was a wealthy American

college, and the music department was well endowed. Every teacher's office had a Steinway piano, on-campus concerts took place regularly, and the library was well equipped, including many recordings. The first courses that I taught included harmony, counterpoint, and orchestration. However, after I received my PhD, I was asked to teach a senior seminar for the graduating class. As a small but prestigious college, most classes had only 10–12 students. The students were accustomed to having courses on Bach, but I offered to teach a course on Beethoven. This unusual offer meant that I had to create the class curriculum as we went along.

The classes went very well. We studied one work a week, including written assignments for each piece. Thus, through teaching, I cultivated my particular interest in Beethoven. The works that I taught remained foremost in my mind, and I included several of them much later in my book on Beethoven, *Transcendent Mastery: Studies in the Music of Beethoven* (2008, corrected ed. 2011). Years later, students told me that they had saved the notes from my classes. My last class took place in 1969, but I remained in close contact with many of my students, including Judy Schwartz, Ellen Rosand, Janet Levy, and Wendy Allenbrook. Feeling very proud of our mutual learning experiences, the students called themselves “The Churginians.”

AP: Your research highlights the innovative qualities of Sammartini's and Beethoven's compositional processes. Sammartini inaugurated the Classical symphonic style while Beethoven's works mark the culmination and close of this period. Did you find any similarities between musical qualities highly valued by them both?

BC: Sammartini and Beethoven, of course, never met. Indeed, Sammartini died in 1775, when Beethoven was only five years old. Moreover, according to our present knowledge, it is doubtful that Beethoven knew Sammartini's works. While Beethoven played the viola in the Bonn orchestra, no records of the orchestra's repertoire survive.

Nevertheless, we may note several similar stylistic preferences. The works of Sammartini and Beethoven both subdivide into Early, Middle, and Late periods, with significant stylistic changes differentiating each of the periods. For both composers, the Middle Period works are the most characteristic—and profoundly influenced future composers.

Several similar compositional preferences developed in these works are particularly striking. Thus, for example, extensive motivic development, a hallmark of Beethoven's Middle Period style, permeates many of Sammartini's compositions, as in the third movement of the Symphony in g minor, JC 65.

Moreover, much of the music composed in the Middle Period highlights a robust flow and continuity of movement, unlike, for example, the multi-sectional periodicity of Antonio Brioschi's music; the intensity of drive and continuity found in Sammartini's symphonies call to mind this dramatic quality in Beethoven's music.

Both composers preferred innovative structural designs, especially in the recapitulations. While Sammartini’s recapitulations usually open with melodic material from the primary theme, they proceed with many changes in the order of the ideas. In this respect, Sammartini influenced Haydn. Giuseppe Carpani, one of Haydn’s earliest biographers, likened Sammartini to an Italian Haydn. Reformulated recapitulations often serve as climactic conclusions in Beethoven’s symphonic movements, as well.

In terms of expression, both composers valued expressive variety, ranging from the highly dramatic to the humorous and witty. While much of Sammartini’s music remains to be studied, we do know that he served as *maestro di capella* in several churches in Milan, and that he composed many religious works. Sammartini also wrote numerous chamber works. These include trios for two violins and bass, cello and continuo, early examples of string quartets, and, toward the end of his life, six quintets for three violins, viola, and bass or cello.¹ These works await publication; however, the copies of the quintets in my possession reveal particularly expressive slow movements.

AP: In addition to your research, you have pursued an exceptionally active professional career as founder and head of the Music Department at Bar-Ilan, as a regular participant in international conferences, and as a recently elected honorary life member of the AMS, and, perhaps above all—as an exceptionally devoted advisor to your graduate students. How were you able to create “concinny” among these many different tasks?

BC: In 1970, I moved to Israel, where I enthusiastically began developing the Department of Music at Bar-Ilan University. The undertaking was costly—but as in Vassar, I felt strongly about the importance of purchasing quality instruments and developing a first-class library. The University went along with me, and we immediately bought a small Steinway—which is still in the department, and, soon after, a large Hamburg Steinway, that cost \$35,000.

In addition to my administrative responsibilities, I loved all aspects of my teaching. I dedicated many hours to preparing my undergraduate History of Western Music courses as well as advanced graduate seminars. As well as teaching at Bar-Ilan, I served as a guest lecturer at seven institutions, including Harvard Summer School, Northwestern University Summer School, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Queens College—CUNY Graduate Center, and, in Israel, at Tel Aviv University, the Hebrew University, and the Rubin Academy in Jerusalem.

Each of these teaching experiences added to my understanding of how we learn. Most important was to synchronize between academic and active learning. If students want to understand Beethoven’s music, they must listen many times and become familiar with the tradition and context in which Beethoven worked. This training includes a systematic

¹ See dissertation, Anna Cattoretti, *Giovanni Battista Sammartini. I Quintetti per archi del 1773* (tesi di laurea, datt., Università degli Studi di Pavia, Scuola di Paleografia e Filologia musicale, 1991–92).

analysis of Classical forms and structures, modes of expression, and the conventional treatment of the instruments. Beethoven also carefully studied the works of predecessors, and, from there, went on to create his innovative, overwhelmingly powerful expression. A vital tool for studying the tradition is to adopt a sensitive and thorough instrument for analysis. I found Jan LaRue's system of analysis particularly suitable for this challenge. When I introduced it at Queens College, many of the students left the class because Queens College was a center for Schenkerian analysis. But I insisted on following the LaRue model. In North Carolina, where I taught courses on Beethoven and the development of the Classic Symphony, I had a very different experience. The students appreciated the LaRue analytical approach. They loved the classes, and, when the term ended, they asked me to continue the course. Among the students were Bill Meredith (Beethoven class), and Tilden Russell (Early Classic Symphony seminar); Bill went on to become a Beethoven authority and Tilden an expert in the Classical minuet.

Working with my graduate students was immensely rewarding and often led to fascinating discoveries. Jenny Gild and Martha Frohlich worked on Beethoven sketches, which was a new field for me. While Jenny was working on the sketches for Piano Sonata opus 14 no. 1, my friend Hannah Abrahamson went to the Columbia University music library, in the hope of finding and photocopying a sketch for the sonata. Unfortunately, she did not find the sketch; however, she decided to search their rare books and manuscripts department, to see what she might find. To her amazement, the librarian brought out a sheet that included a sketch in Beethoven's hand. Excited by this coincidental find, she requested three xeroxes of the sheet (a standard exposure, an underexposure, and an overexposure). She rushed them to the main post office at 32nd and 8th Avenue, to send them to me. Carefully deciphering the xeroxes in Israel, I was astonished to find that, in addition to the sketch of the Credo from Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, the verso included a copy of Mozart's *Kyrie Fugue* from his *Requiem*. Thus, it became evident that Beethoven was fascinated by Mozart's treatment of the theme, which came back each time on a different beat. This find led me to contact Alan Tyson and Siegfried Brandenburg, both world experts in the study of Beethoven's sketches, and they, too, remained my close, lifelong friends.

Another example of a professional activity that grew into an exciting experience involved a seminar on Beethoven's Fourth Symphony that I taught in 1976. In addition to my classes, we hosted leading authorities on Classical music and Beethoven, including Leonard Ratner, Alfred Brendel, and Alan Tyson. Also, we hosted Jan LaRue, and performers from the Israel Philharmonic orchestra. Our staff member, Prof. Joachim Braun, together with the students, worked on comparing the tempi of different performances of the Symphony and the sources of the various editions. All of the students worked very hard, as they engaged in unusual combinations of independent research and collective classwork.

These experiences led me to believe sincerely in the importance and benefits of music education. Today, unfortunately, music is not a favorite subject, but I think that this is because few people understand art music. I firmly believe that the solution is not to

remove music from the program but rather to teach it more. We need to offer stimulating courses in music appreciation, explained concerts, and to promote active, educational programs in schools. I, too, remain an active viola and violin player, and I practice every day. Indeed, my love of the violin influenced the choice of works that I included in my book, *Transcendent Mastery: Studies in the Music of Beethoven*. Thus, in addition to the pieces that I taught at Vassar, I decided to include the violin concerto and the last, neglected violin sonata, opus 96. The four-movement cycle of this sonata differs from the three-movement norm, and its lyricism looks forward to Beethoven's Late Period, as found in op. 132. The sonata is particularly meaningful for me because I performed it together with my dearest friend, pianist Edith Kraus.

And so, I feel fortunate to have Classical music accompany me throughout my daily activities. Hannah Abrahamson and I chose her car because we were attracted to its license number—6162673, which is reminiscent of well-known catalog numbers: 61 = Beethoven's violin concerto, 626 = Mozart's Requiem; and 73 = Beethoven's Fifth, Piano Concerto. What could be more inspiring than to take a ride with such dear friends?

About the Interviewer

Adena Portowitz, Ph.D., musicologist and music educator, senior lecturer, founder and past chair of the Department of Instrumental Music Education at the Givat Washington Academic College. Her research interests focus on interconnections between expression and formal structures in tonal music and underlying mechanisms linking music education and cognitive, social, and personal development of at-risk children. Since 2002, she has served as editor and co-editor of *MinAd: Israel Studies in Musicology Online*.