

# Hopkinson Smith, Beyond the Instrument

*A lutenist pursuing “beauty and gesture”*

by LARA PELLIGRINELLI

**H**OPKINSON SMITH ’70 describes J.S. Bach as a musical ecologist. “He recycled so many of his own works,” Smith explains. “He never stopped trying to adapt what he’d written.” It was an accepted musical practice at the time, but one imagines the composer was driven at least in part by pragmatism: his posts in a number of German cities required him to produce new compositions at a fierce pace. Refashioning musical materials helped him keep up with those demands. “Even so,” Smith adds, “writing a cantata a week would not have been a manageable task for the rest of us mortals.”

As a lutenist, Smith has had to contend with the Baroque composer’s propensity to repurpose. Bach wrote little for the instrument, mostly transcriptions of existing works. Smith’s latest recording is a collection of Bach’s Sonatas and Partitas (BWV 1001–1006), six pieces ostensibly for violin, and the Suites (BWV 1007–1009, 995, 1010, 1012), widely recognized as scored for cello. But as Smith writes in his liner notes for the violin sonatas, “[T]he music is conceived on

such an abstract plane that the score already appears to be a kind of adaptation” from a theoretical ideal. Bach’s arrangements highlight a rigor and logic to his compositions not rooted in individual instruments but able instead to transcend them.

Smith himself has always possessed a polymorphous musicality. Growing up, he played electric guitar, banjo, and mandolin, and in high school, he remembers, “I’d learn how to play whatever they needed in the band, without a teacher.” It was the 1960s, and Smith, inspired by the likes of the New Lost City Ramblers, delved into folk and Appalachian music. “Then I latched on to classical guitar—or it latched on to me. It was clear what I wanted to do, and there was no looking back, and there was no choice.”

That is, until he discovered the lute in college. For three semesters at Harvard,



**Hopkinson Smith playing the German theorbo built for him by Joel van Lennep**

he studied with musicologist John Ward, who specialized in the repertoire for Spanish vihuela (a Renaissance guitar that Smith has also mastered) and English lute. Smith’s attraction to the lute was fourfold: “It was the sound and shape of the instrument, in addition to the incredible quality and quantity of the different repertoires from different regions and different eras.”

He found ready opportunities to play within Boston’s incipient early-music scene. Upon graduation, he opted to study for a year at the prestigious Schola Cantorum in Basel, Switzerland, where he’s lived ever since; Smith likens it to “stepping out of the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance.” The burgeoning community there included the late vocalist Montserrat Figueras and her husband, viol player Jordi Savall, with whom Smith performed and, in 1974, officially founded Hesperion XX, arguably the most acclaimed early-music ensemble of all time. The performers’ imaginative yet scholarly approaches breathed life into Hispanic and European repertoires from before 1800, music that had been all but forgotten. Smith performed with the ensemble until the mid 1980s, when, he says with good humor, “Hesperion’s projects got bigger and big-

## Chapter & Verse

Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

**Orin Tilevitz writes,** “One day early in Chem 20, Professor Doering told us that if your experiment was inconsistent with your hypothesis, there must be something wrong with the experiment. (He was joking.) Is there an original source for this?”

**“the music they love”** (March-April). Jeremiah Jenkins and Sarah Hamilton were the first to identify this borrowing from the first chapter of *Indian Sum-*

*mer of a Forsyte*, the second part of John Galsworthy’s *Forsyte Saga*. The direct quote is, “By the cigars they smoke, and the composers they love, ye shall know the texture of men’s souls. Old Jolyon could not bear a strong cigar or Wagner’s music.”

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ger and I got smaller and smaller.”

In Renaissance repertoires, the lute elaborates on the written lines in ensemble music. During the Baroque period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it renders the *basso continuo*, a flexible system for creating harmonies from a notational shorthand. Smith preferred to focus on solo repertoire rather than these supporting roles. Today, his 30 recordings ([www.hopkinsonsmith.com](http://www.hopkinsonsmith.com)) range from the sixteenth-century publications of Pierre Attaignant, the first sources of French lute music, to the compositions of Bach's prolific contemporary, the lutenist Sylvius Leopold Weiss.

A master of musical ecology himself, Smith has followed in Bach's footsteps. With the exception of two pieces, what Smith presents in his most recent collection are his own renderings—for the 13-course Baroque lute and its lower-

pitched sibling, the theorbo—of Bach's compositions. His instruments were built by Joel van Lennep, incidentally an old Somerville, Massachusetts, neighbor.

Smith compares the sonatas and partitas, when played on the violin and cello, to “the sound of a storm raging against the coast.” The technical challenges of those works and the suites—among the most formidable a performer can face—foster their own sense of time and drama. “For example,” Smith explains, “if you look at the beginning of the Chaconne [from Partita no. 2 in D Minor], the violin has a three-voice chord—and it's impossible for the violin to play the three voices. But Bach wrote it as a three-voice chord. I'm sure what he's saying is that this is what you must hear inside. It points you in a direction. What you want is beauty and gesture.”

Yet with the lute, a stringed instru-

ment that is inherently chordal and plucked, not bowed, Smith can realize Bach's notations in a more literal fashion. As a result, his versions naturally feel more pastoral and at ease than their violin and cello counterparts. Rather than waves dashing against rocky shores, the variations of the Chaconne in D Minor sound more like gentle rain on a quiet pond. On cello, the Prelude from the Suite in C Major makes the heart race with its joyful striving, the bow pivoting boldly across the strings. On lute, it is all warmth and intimacy, the fingers showering precious dewdrops.

“With any instrument, what one wants to do is find perfect union of physical gesture with musical gesture,” Smith says. “This is the lifelong task of a musician.”



Visit [harvardmag.com](http://harvardmag.com) to hear selections from Smith's recordings of Bach.

## Seeing Spring

*Photographs that teem with life*

In 2013, office-bound in a high-stress architecture job in Manhattan, Anna Agoston, M.Arch. II '04, then an occasional photographer, rarely ventured outside. “I was let go in March,” she recalls, “and it was as though I had never seen spring.” Once she saw, she couldn't stop looking. Camera in hand and flush with time, she began taking pictures of what grew in the sidewalk cracks on her street in Brooklyn, and in the nearby parks and botanic gardens. The result is a series, hundreds strong, that examines floral features in extreme close-up: the ridge along a stem; a thistle's spikes. Agoston attributes her delight in these details to her limited contact with nature while growing up in Paris. “I was stunned by the countryside,” she says, especially during family hiking trips to the nearby forest of Fontainebleau, with its huge formations of white rock. “Maybe now with my macro lens, looking at tiny things with a lens that makes them look much larger—maybe I'm looking for the boulders of my childhood.”

Even in close-up, her plants don't look like monuments of a distant geological age. But captured in black and white, against a plain background, a bulb is made sculptural, and the curve of a leaf, architectural. The intensity of Agoston's focus abstracts these forms, making them seem durable, almost timeless.

For an earlier series, Dorm, she knocked on dozens of her graduate-student neighbors' doors during finals week and asked to take their pictures. Where that class assignment documented



Photographs 152 (left) and 60, from Agoston's untitled series

the diversity within a local ecosystem, Agoston's current project removes life from the context of habitat. (And her current subjects—numbered, but unnamed—don't object to being studied so closely, from every angle.) A tendril curls, doubling back to coil around itself; two woody twigs reach to braid together. Her true subject seems to be the mysterious elegance of adaptation, finding pragmatic solutions to unseen problems.

When her ongoing series hits 300 images, she plans to publish a third book, and one day, a single collected volume. By late February, Agoston had taken photograph 245. “The winter,” she says, “is a little slow.”

—SOPHIA NGUYEN