

# CAPE ANN Museum

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### **A THOUSAND SUNDAY MORNINGS HARPSICHORD CONCERT WITH FRANCES CONOVER FITCH AND GREG BOVER LECTURE FINDING AID & TRANSCRIPT**

- Speakers:** Greg Bover, Frances Conover Fitch
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#### **Video Description**

Offered in collaboration with the Gloucester Lyceum and the Sawyer Free Library, this program was held in the Fitz Henry Lane Gallery at the Cape Ann Museum and features internationally renowned harpsichordist Frances Conover Fitch playing a selection of 16th, 17th, and 18th century pieces on an instrument that

27 Pleasant Street, Gloucester, Massachusetts 01930 USA

+1 978-283-0455

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was assembled by Greg Bover. Employed by the Gloucester-based organ company CB Fisk, Inc., Bover began building the French double harpsichord 25 years ago and could only dedicate time on Sunday mornings to work on it, hence the program's title. His brief slideshow chronicles the instrument's history, construction, and decorative detail and is followed by over an hour of Fitch's beautifully distinctive musical performance.

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### Subject list

Nicolas Dumont	Frances Conover Fitch
William Dowd	Greg Bover
Allan Winkler	French double harpsichord
Carole Bolsey	

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### Transcript

00:10

Courtney Richardson

Welcome to the Cape Ann Museum. This is a special night; we don't often do this in this gallery. So we're very happy to be partnering with the Gloucester Lyceum and the Sawyer Free Library.

00:26

I just wanted to remind you to turn your cell phones off, please. And also just mention, it seems like summer is sort of quieting, coming to an end. So the museum has a whole new list of fall programs. So make sure you grab one of our fall calendars. And if you're not a member, maybe consider becoming a member and this will get mailed to your house.

00:54

Again, we're pleased to be participating in this event. And I'd like to introduce the director of the library Carol Gray. Thank you.

01:10

Carol Gray

Good evening. Thank you for coming. I will say that you are in tune for a very wonderful and rare treat this evening. I had the pleasure of seeing the first performance in Rockport several months ago, and this is Gloucester's premiere. As director of the Sawyer Free Library and active member of its Lyceum Committee, I wish to note our appreciation for our continued collaborative efforts

and relationship with the Cape Ann Museum. And thank Courtney Richardson, Director of Education, Educational Outreach, and Public Programming and Director Ronda Faloon and her staff for all their efforts in helping us to present this program here this evening. We are truly gifted to have such a priceless resource as the Cape Ann Museum accessible to the greater Cape Ann community.

02:09

It's quite apropos that we host this musical and cultural event here in the Lane Gallery. The library's great benefactor, Sam Sawyer, was a devout patron of the arts and local artists. The library is fortunate to have on exhibit two Fitz Henry Lane's and a number of other paintings from Mr. Sawyer's personal collection. In fact, Lane himself was an early director of the Lyceum Committee. Founded in 1830 by a group of notable Gloucester citizens, the early Lyceum attracted as many as three and 400 people to its lectures, its purpose, the improvement of its members in useful knowledge and the advancement of popular education. And among its distinguished early speakers were Oliver Wendell Holmes, Thoreau, Emerson, **the arctic explorer Burlingame**, and many others. It was the strong educational and cultural mission of the Lyceum that attracted the attention of the generous Boston merchant and native of Gloucester, Sam Sawyer, and the rest, as they say, is history or across the street. Earlier this evening, I enjoyed the Marsden Hartley exhibit, which I encourage you all to see, if you haven't, upstairs. And I was particularly pleased to see it noted that Hartley also had an appreciation of Gloucester's local library. I was going to mention the cell phones and rest rooms that are downstairs and exits.

03:46

So now, before I introduce the honored guests this evening, I want to thank chair of the Lyceum Committee, Mary Weissblum, who was in the foyer, handing out our list of upcoming library events. And also thank the other members of the committee who are in attendance this evening, including our videographer Bob Quinn. I'm particularly honored to introduce this evening's guests, in addition to being Vice President of Operations for CB Fisk, Rotarian and consummate volunteer, builder of harpsichords as well as backyard decks, Greg Bover is the most notable former President of the Board of Directors of the library and the driving force behind our exterior renovation projects. His wife, Frances Conover Fitch, accomplished harpsichordist and organist, has received many accolades in her distinguished career as performer and teacher. She is noted for her sensitivity and intuitive strength. May I present Mr. Greg Bover.

[Interlude of harpsichord music played by Frances Conover Fitch followed by applause]

08:48

Greg Bover

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. And thank you for attending this concert celebrating the completion of our new harpsichord.

[Frances interrupts to adjust the microphone]

09:08

Tonight, Francie will play a selection of music written for harpsichord from the 15th to the 21st centuries, and she'll tell you a bit about the music as she goes. But first, I'd like to tell you a little about the harpsichord in general. And then about the process of building this particular instrument. And I'll ask my able assistant to go to the desktop.

09:41

A member of the audience to another  
Who do you suppose that is?

09:46

Frances Conover Fitch

[as she goes to the computer]

We say, "try to be formal", but it doesn't work. And here comes "slides", "play slide show".

10:05

Greg Bover

Excellent. As many of you may already know, the harpsichord was invented sometime in the Middle Ages, probably around 1350 and probably in northern France or Flanders, by whom exactly no one knows. The harpsichord is often thought of as the forerunner to the piano. A piano strikes its strings with felted hammers launched upward by the action connected to the keys. The harpsichord is much less complex, plucking the strings with tiny bits of bird quill, now often delrin plastic. These are attached to thin strips of wood called "jacks" resting vertically on the tail of each key.

11:05

This is a longitudinal section of a harpsichord. That is, if we took a chainsaw just about there and looked at it from this end, we'd see something like this. The keys here. The keys are balanced in the middle, so that when the player pushes down on this end, this end goes up. These small pieces of wood are the jacks and they have quill in them right near the strings. So that when we push down on the key, the jack goes up, and the quill plucks the string. A tiny pivot and spring allow the quill to bypass the string on the way back down, and a damper stills the string when the key is released. And we have a little video here with a tour of the harpsichord and then some jacks plucking strings. But the sound doesn't work. Oh, well.

[Frances makes repeated pinging sounds to compensate]

12:57

The vibration of the string excites the thin spruce soundboard, which then resonates over the hollow body of the instrument and generates the music that we hear. The longer strings in the bass here play the lower pitches, and the shorter strings play the higher pitches. Every time you go one octave up the keyboard, the strings get half as long. The harpsichord does not get louder, if the player hits the keys harder. The quill or plectrum can only pluck just so hard. Therefore,

much of the artistry of playing the harpsichord involves carefully spacing the notes to give the illusion of loud and soft. And a large part of the artistry of building a harpsichord is in the voicing, the microscopic carving of the quills, done with a scalpel to make sure that each note has the right voice, blending perfectly with all the other notes.

14:13

The story of how this instrument was built is not really all about my work. It's more about the people who helped and without whom it never would have been finished. This harpsichord started out as Lynette Tsaing's project back in the 1980s. She had her own harpsichord business and had built quite a few instruments. But when she closed her shop, she gave us the beginnings of this one. It was intended to be a faithful copy of a harpsichord by Nicolas Dumont built in Paris in 1707. The original still exists in a private collection in Delaware. Many of the pieces of Lynette's case were present in their raw form, and the corners of the case had been joined up. But there were no keyboards, no soundboard, strings, or mechanism. Because I had apprenticed with William Dowd, one of the great harpsichord builders of the 20th century, I wanted to build this instrument as he would have done. So I took it all apart again, made some changes to the wrest plank, which is the heavy piece of wood that pulls the tuning pins and reexamined the framing plan. The frames are what help the case withstand the pressure of 186 strings pulled tight enough to sound the pitch, an enormous task for what is essentially a wooden box. Here's a picture of some of the internal framing where the bent side meets the wrest plank. The bent side, of course, is the curved part of the harpsichord, and then it makes the corner to the **cheek**. And then just above the keyboards is the wrest plank, a big heavy piece of oak that holds the tuning pins.

16:26

Here, as throughout the project, I relied heavily on the counsel and advice of our friend Allan Winkler. We were apprentices in different shops back in the 70s, and we've helped each other out for many years. All of my work on this harpsichord took place in the Fisk organ shop, over on the border between Magnolia and West Gloucester. I've been an organ builder there since 1978. And I'm fortunate that the late Charles Fisk instituted a policy of allowing all shop members the privilege of working on their own projects after hours. And I've taken full advantage of that policy for these many, many years. It's only appropriate that I also thank my Fisk colleagues; they put up with having this project in the shop for a very long time. And more importantly, they gave me the opportunity to work in one of the world's best wood shops, surrounded by the culture of first-class work that they uphold. Little by little, almost every Sunday morning, I would work on this instrument for a few hours. And that is where this concert gets its name. If I averaged about 40 Sundays a year for 25 years, that's 1000 Sunday mornings.

17:59

The two keyboards alone took more than a year of Sundays to complete. I can report that this is not an efficient way to work. Sometimes it seemed as if half of each session was spent taking the tools out and then putting them away. Over the years, Francie would tell me she wanted nothing for Christmas or birthdays except the harpsichord. And so some years she'd get a box of sharps

or a music rack or some other part. Many of the operations were ones that I have only little experience with, for instance, the logarithmic curve, that is the shape of the bridges, requires that they be steam bent. Steam bending means taking the raw wood and placing it in a hot steam-filled box for an hour or so. And then whipping it out and bending it around a form with clamps before it cools. When it does cool, and it's taken off the form, it relaxes only a bit and can be shaped and sanded and then glued down to the soundboard in the proper place. The soundboard, which is outlined here. And these are the bridges being glued down to them with bent sticks that go up to a ceiling. And if you bend the sticks in between the ceiling and the platform, it pushes down on the bridges, and they very effectively are glued down, because you couldn't reach in all that way with a clamp and have it really exert any force. So we use these sticks **called dough sticks**, a very ancient way of clamping, to put things together. So this is the soundboard here, just laid out on a table. So that's the shape of it there. That soundboard is made from very thin pieces of straight, tightly-grained spruce. It is just over 1/8 of an inch thick in the thickest place, and it tapers in a precise manner over its whole surface. In the treble it's only about 1/16 of an inch thick, about as thin as a potato chip and just about as brittle. To hold it together and to resonate properly, it has ribs or sound bars on the bottom side. The placement and shaping of these are crucial to the sound of the instrument. They are even cut away as they pass beneath the bridges. So in this picture now, the soundboard is upside down, and these ribs are being glued down or glued to the bottom side of the soundboard. Here's a place where, on the other side of the soundboard, the bridge runs by, and the rib is cut out there, so that the rib doesn't deaden those notes that are on the bridge where the rib runs underneath. So that little piece of soundboard is still free to resonate. While I was faithful to the original arrangement of ribs on the 1707 instrument of Nicolas Dumont, I pulled every trick I knew to make the soundboard as resonant as it could be. There's nothing worse than a "plinky" harpsichord, and I feel fortunate that this one has wound up with a rich full voice.

21:58

Once all the woodworking was done, I turned to my friend Bob Duffy of Indianapolis to make the 186 jacks, like those you saw in the video, a job that would have cost me another year on Sundays. At the same time, we took the instrument and its then plain soundboard to our friend Carole Bolsey of Kingston, to be painted in the style of French harpsichords of the 18th century. Carole is an artist and painter of very high achievement, whose oils are part of many collections, both private and public. But back in the 70s she painted harpsichord soundboards after having studied the methods and materials of the historical examples. She created this amazing collection on some of our favorite flora and fauna, just as a painter of the time might have done for an aristocratic patron. With the help of our son, **Mick**, we chose historically accurate colors for the exterior and **keywell**. And he also helped us to retain the services of his talented friend and RISD classmate, Michael Tymon of Pennsylvania, who, in consultation with Carole Bolsey, created this original scene for the inside of the lid. Once again in the proper style of the period, he cleverly incorporated motifs from Courbet, Fragonard, and Watteau.

23:42

I then made all the strings for the harpsichord using wire from Malcolm Rose in England, who makes music wire the way it was made 300 years ago, using alloys and wire-drawing techniques that were in use at the time the original Dumont harpsichord was built. Allan Winkler and I consulted closely on the stringing schedule, and I was fortunate to benefit from the considerable research that he has done into which gauge and which alloy is best for each note.

24:18

Then it was time for voicing. The process we call “voicing a harpsichord” is by far the most exacting and crucial part. And it is usually where amateur builders like me founder. Almost from the beginning, we had decided to ask Allan to do this part of the job. To voice a note on a harpsichord, the tiny plectrum that plucks the string must be carefully cut to overlap the string just enough, and then it must be sculpted with a scalpel to the precise shape that will pluck the string with the right amount of force to produce just the right amount of sound. This is literally microscopic work. Not only does it take good eyes and a steady hand to carve the plectra, it also takes practiced ears and a musical sense to judge the result. Allan has all these resources at his command, whereas, I do not. When he concluded the voicing and Francie played the finished harpsichord for the first time, I was able to hear the fruition of those 1000 Sundays.

25:33

It was a long journey of the kind I have finally learned to enjoy for its own sake, but to give my wife the means of musical expression, to be able to hear nightly in our home that which you hear only this night, that has made it all the sweeter. We hope, after the concert, you'll come up and take a closer look at the harpsichord. And if you have any questions, I'll try to answer them. But for now, let's get back to the music.

26:23

So we're going to turn off the noisy projector and the air-handling system.

26:33

Frances Conover Fitch

We thought that we would try to keep the climate in here from getting too warm as long as possible. But it's too loud, so it will be going off shortly. And I need to move this. [adjusts microphone] Can you see over there well enough?

26:53

Audience Member

Yep.

26:54

Frances Conover Fitch

So while this is happening, I might as well tell you a little bit about the pieces that I'm playing. They cover a long period of time, intentionally. And the first piece is a keyboard version of a vocal piece written by Jacobo da Bologna. (It's getting better.) And the piece comes from an

anonymous collection clearly written for keyboard, I think, although some people argue that it's not intended for keyboard -- that it's for any instruments. It is marked by extremely elaborate ornamentation. And from that, I'm going to take a jump into the 16th century in Italy. The Faenze Codex and one or two other sources are quite a lot earlier than anything that came -- than anything else, I should say. So there's a big gap where we don't have much music, 15th century in particular. So there will be these two pieces from Middle Ages/early Renaissance.

[Music and Applause]

32:09

I should say that those dance pieces, those three little settings at the end, were pretty typical. That's what a harpsichordist usually did -- was to play for dancing. And it's actually one reason why there's probably not much music written down, because there's lots of room and also need for improvisation when you play for dancing. It goes on and on and on and you get so bored that you do something else. That was the same basic piece, but three different versions of it very short. So that's what they were doing before about 1600 -- 1550. The next piece is a pair again of dances of pavane which is a slow duple dance and a galliard which is a faster and much livelier dance in triple meter. And this pair may or may not have been intended to go together, but they follow each other in the book in which they were published. And they are very typical in that -- they are typical of this repertoire -- in that there are three strains, three tunes, in the piece, and each one is presented in a fairly plain form and then ornamented again. So you'll hear that, I think, in both the pavane and the galliard.

[Music]

33:39

Audience Member

Excuse me. Could we have that humming sound turned off?

33:46

Frances Conover Fitch

Is it back? Is it on? Let's unplug it. [She goes and unplugs something but the noise continues.] Well, I'm sorry. I don't know what it is.

34:04

Greg Bover

No, it's still ambient noise. There's a register underneath there.

34:13

Frances Conover Fitch

Well, I suppose it's better. I unplugged this. It's better for the artwork, but I'm sorry. The only thing I can suggest, if you want to do this, is that you all move closer. And you're welcome to do

that. Or I think if I move the instrument closer, the lighting won't be very good. We'll just do the best we can. However, if you want to move your chairs, go ahead.

[Music and Applause]

42:57

The next group of pieces comes from a manuscript called the [?] manuscript, and in that manuscript all of the preludes are grouped together, and all of the courantes are grouped together. So anytime you put together a suite of dances, it's a little bit hypothetical, let's say. But the order of these dances is very much a constant in the French Baroque period.

43:23

And this next set of pieces comes from the earlier part of what's called the French [?] period. And you may find that it's interesting, as I do, that it ends with a minuet, a very kind of simple, quiet piece. And I think that's because in the French court, the dances were done one couple at a time, and everybody else watched. And there was a hierarchy, so the king would first dance with the queen, and then the queen would dance with the next person down, and it would kind of piggyback that way. And very often there was a dance at the end that everybody could dance. And I've sort of always pictured that this minuet was back to the solos. And maybe it was just the king and queen. The king, if you were here early, you saw a great picture of Louie XIV. He was a great dancer and did a great deal in his court to foster the arts. Some say that it was the way he kept people busy enough that they wouldn't plot an intrigue against him. You might also have noticed, I can't really show you a good picture of it, but I can tell you that this opening prelude (and there was an example of one in the slides) it is written only in whole notes with sort of squiggly lines which seem to mean nothing until you come to understand that they indicate the notes that you have to hold down in order to get resonance out of the instrument, so I'd be happy to show that to you later.

[Music and Applause]

1:02:50

Thank you. Thank you very much. The next two pieces are from the Rococo period. When you come up, you'll see a lot better than you can right now, but this little creature here is a direct quotation from a painting by Fragonard, called *The Swing*. And this music that I'm about to play goes along with that style, if you can kind of picture a rather ornate kind of frothy exterior, which doesn't always mean that the music is shallow. But it does mean that there's sort of lace cuffs on everything, and in this piece, these pieces, especially the first one, which is called *Les Grâces*, or *The Graces*, you'll notice that there's an awful lot of fluttering.

[Music and Applause]

1:13:55

Herbert Howells was a composer who's known more for his church music, and he actually wrote these pieces for clavichord, but they work quite nicely on harpsichord. There were very few people writing for either clavichord or harpsichord at this time. And not surprisingly, these pieces are all in the form of dances. I should say also that another similarity between these and the previous piece, similarities that they're named for people, and [?] or [?] was somebody. Sometimes we know who these people were; sometimes we don't. And I don't know whether de la Mare in the middle movement of this next set is Walter De la Mare [?] or not. Speculation.

[Music and Applause]

1:21:57

I hope that this last piece will be a surprise to you. It usually is. Many people don't believe that composers are writing for harpsichord, but actually they are, and in great volume actually. So this is a piece by a guy who lives in the south called Ed McLean. And I think he really knows how to make a harpsichord sound good.

[Music and Applause]