

Credo: Complete Bach Brandenburg Concerti in Reinberger Chamber Hall at Severance (July 26)

by Carlyn Kessler



On Sunday night, July 26, participants in Credo's Brandenburg Project performed all six of J.S. Bach's Brandenburg concerti at Severance Hall's Reinberger Chamber Hall, following an intensive weeklong festival and July 24 performance at Symphony Center in Chicago, IL. The program seemed right at home in Reinberger. The

ornate hall, with its candlesticks and gold plating resembling an 18th century salon, perfectly transported audience members back to Bach's time, if only for an evening.

The concerti were performed out of numerical order, which made for a more varied and balanced program. In spite of some issues with intonation and rhythmical unity in the Brandenburg Concerto No. 4, which began the program, both the soloists (Thomas Cooper, violin, and Daniel Carlo and Doug DeVries, flutes) and orchestra delightfully captured the spirit and charisma of the work.

The piece was followed by welcoming words from Credo's Conductor, Artistic Director, and Founder, Peter Slowik, who noted the three prevalent national styles present in the six concerti: German, French, and Italian. Referring to the second work on the program, the Concerto No. 6 for two viola soloists, Slowik noted that the first movement is a delightful example of the German fugue. The violists play almost exactly the same music, but in canon, an eighth note apart, which he called "tedious but remarkable."

The French style often contains trills and filigree, “much like a room that has nice paintings on the walls,” Slowik said, motioning to his surroundings and earning chuckles from the audience. Finally, he explained, the Italian style is rooted in virtuosity. Slowik urged the audience to “keep a mental scorecard” for the three styles as they would appear throughout the remainder of the program.

Violists Corey Worley and Alyssa Adamec did a fine job at capturing the spirit of the sixth concerto, which contains unusual soloistic writing, notably ahead of its time. Cellist Helen Peyrebrune, whose was not acknowledged as a soloist but whose part contains considerable virtuosity itself, shined through. The work’s sprightly third movement was sweet, driven, and charming.

Perhaps the most unusual instrumentation is employed in the second concerto, scored for solo violin, flute, oboe, trumpet, and orchestra. Violinist Maria Beltavski was radiant both in presence and sound, performing with utmost awareness and musical sensitivity. Hannah Hammel’s flute line floated beautifully above the violin line in the second movement. The oboe (Natasha Keating) and trumpet (Daniel Taubenheim) lines were so unified in tone and timbre, notably in the declamatory third movement, that the divide between wind and brass families momentarily ceased to exist.

Concerto No. 1 was the first piece on the program with a seated orchestra (soloists included), encircling the harpsichord. Slowik noted that this is the largest of the Brandenburg concerti. Keating’s keening oboe melody carried over the density of the orchestra in the Adagio second movement.

Before the fifth concerto, Slowik described the mission of the Credo festival, which places “music in a holistic context,” rooted in faith and humanitarian principles. Credo students partake in a variety of humanitarian activities as far-reaching as performances in prisons and service in food banks, extending their gifts to the greater community.

The fifth concerto featured perhaps the most strikingly virtuosic solo on the program. Harpsichordist Wesley Hall’s lightning-fast cadenza in the first movement was so stunning that it elicited immediate applause from audience members. Violinist Ann Yu and flutist Hannah Hammel excitedly portrayed the lively, dance-infused Allegro movement, reminiscent of an Irish jig.

The concert ended with the third and perhaps most recognizable concerto, written for string orchestra and harpsichord. Slowik urged the audience to “follow the bouncing ball” of the fugal melody which is passed among the instruments. Because the players sat in a horseshoe surrounding Slowik, this “passing” could be seen as well as heard. The performance was positively charming.

Baroque music poses an inevitable problem in performance practice when involving modern musicians playing on modern instruments far different from those of Bach's time. While there was some disparity among the young players throughout the program with respect to Baroque versus modern technique, particularly their vibrato and bow control, it was clear that the group put in thoughtful preparation. Every player exuded a keen generosity of spirit, impressively capturing Bach's brilliant, charismatic writing.

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