

Review**Canton Symphony Goes for Baroque
with Erin Cooper Gay (November 3)**

by Tom Wachunas



If not performed in a properly balanced fashion, Baroque-era music is often a more cerebral encounter than an emotionally alluring one to the listener. Musicians can get so caught up in delivering the music's characteristically frothy ornamentation (which does allow for some exciting virtuosity on the part of soloists) that their technical prowess overshadows its intended "spiritual" affect, which can range from dramatic urgency and melancholy to reverential majesty and unfettered joy.

Fortunately, the Canton Symphony Orchestra (CSO) avoided that shortcoming during its all-Baroque concert on November 3 in Umstattd Performing Arts Hall. Not surprisingly, in performing the nine works on the program (four by Handel, and one each by J.S. Bach, Jeremiah Clarke, Arcangelo Corelli, Johann Pachelbel and Antonio Vivaldi), the orchestra was technically faultless. Most important and inspiring, though, was the pure expressivity of textures and moods conveyed by the musicians.

Genuine emoting was abundantly present in the four vocal pieces that featured guest artist Erin Cooper Gay, who is both a professional French horn player and a remarkable soprano. Her singing is well endowed with a seductively warm, lyric quality. In fact, Gay was at one point the CSO principal horn for eight years, and I can't help but think that the aural character of that instrument has somehow magically fused with her voice.

She clearly captivated the audience with her characterization of mournful solemnity in *Lascia ch'oi pianga* (*Let me weep*), the most famous aria from Handel's opera, *Rinaldo*. But the versatile Gay also offered a delightfully lighthearted side in her portrait of a frenetic caffeine addict sipping coffee in J.S. Bach's whimsical Cantata No. 211, aka *The Coffee Cantata*. Introducing the work, a very good-humored Gerhardt Zimmermann regaled the audience with a schmaltzy short monologue on coffee, the "devil's brew," as he at one point quaffed heartily from a mug of beer.

Gay's performance of the Vivaldi tone painting, *In Furore Iustissimae Irae* (*In the Fury of the Most Just Wrath*), was utterly breathtaking. The work is a propulsive expression of God's anger at human malfeasance, an impassioned promise of repentance, and an other-

wise electrifying showpiece for coloratura virtuosity. Gay embraced its melodic leaps and churning chromatic descents with astonishing vigor.

In *Let the Bright Seraphim*, an aria from Handel's oratorio, *Samson*, Gay was ebullience personified. The rich timbre of her voice was wholly stunning in her intricate harmonies with Scott Johnston, CSO principal trumpet, who had dazzled us earlier in the program with Jeremiah Clarke's famous *The Prince of Denmark's March*.

Along with a mesmerizing rendition of Pachelbel's iconic Canon in D Major, and a fittingly majestic reading of Handel's *Watermusic*, this program in its entirety rekindled my appreciation of Baroque music. Additionally, the concert was a tantalizing demonstration of CSO's bilingual capacity, so to speak. These players are eminently fluent in the musical languages of mind *and* heart.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 11, 2013