

The Perfect Partnership: *Bach and Beer*, with Stuart Pincombe, cello

By Daniel Hautzinger



“Bach was full of joy, and I think that really stems from his faith. He was a strong Lutheran and you see this in all of his music. He was a very complete, whole being. And yeah, I think he loved to throw back a few beers,” said cellist Stuart Pincombe over the phone.

Bach and beer? Besides alliteration and a secure place in German culture, they don’t seem to have much in common, what with the stern image we have of Bach. But “Bach and Beer” is the title of a program that Pincombe will present at the [Bottle House Brewery](#) in Cleveland Heights on July 15th, a chance to drink deeply of “two of the finer things in life,” as Pincombe put it.

Pincombe grew up on a goat farm in Missouri, and “loves the simplicity of that life,” but now resides in The Hague in the Netherlands. He holds both Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, where he studied modern cello and viola da gamba. That split interest continues today: he is interested in both historical performance practice and contemporary music, performing frequently with Apollo’s Fire here in Cleveland. He is currently in Ohio to teach at Credo Oberlin.

The image of Bach as intensely serious and rigid is largely a myth. “Bach was hilarious,” Pincombe said. “This guy was always getting in trouble at work. He once wanted to hear this organist, Buxtehude, and he asked for leave for a short amount of time to hear him. Then he didn’t show up to work for a month or more.”

We also know for a fact that Bach enjoyed a brew: Pincombe has found records of Bach’s salary as court organist at Weimar, which include “thirty pails of beer from our castle brewery here, beverage-tax-free” as part of his payment.

But why juxtapose Bach and beer, even with Bach’s taste for the beverage? “There are some parallels between the craft of brewing and what I do as a musician,” Pincombe said.

In both music and brewing, “we look to the past and we choose what is useful, beneficial and good, and we keep that. We can throw out the things that we’ve learned are not good. People used to put things in beer like tail of newt or skin of a frog. We’ve learned from that, and now we don’t want to be drinking those things.

“As a performer I look to the ingredients of the past and I choose what is beneficial and good and I throw out what is not good. There are certain performance practices from that time that are not the most beneficial or the healthiest. We look to the past to gain knowledge of what we can improve on, but also of what is beautiful.”

Alongside that philosophical reason is a practical one. “My focus is to create new audiences and relate to all different types of people. Concert halls are somewhat alienating for some people, so I thought what better place to give a concert than where people are already meeting to have fun?” Similarly, because Pincombe feels that ticket prices for classical music are often high, the audience can name their own price for his recital at Bottle House. It will also feature a suggested beer pairing for each of the first three Bach Cello Suites, which make up the program.

Programs like “Bach and Beer” and Pincombe’s attraction to historical performance practice come from a desire to communicate with as many people as possible. “My interest in history and how we can think about beauty and life in general are my main concerns. My goal is to just make people think. We have so much to learn from each other and I find we often don’t meet people where they are and take time to talk about what we do. We just kind of do it and expect people to know. I think that’s one of the biggest flaws in classical music.

“But there’s this strong necessity in my walk in life that is always pushing me towards this kind of communication. I think there’s something important that I’m supposed to say and do while I’m here on Earth. There are things that I couldn’t say or do if I were to maybe to go back to a farm life. I hope eventually to settle down somewhere. But for now this is what I feel so strongly that I need to do, because music is such a powerful way of communicating beauty and goodness to people, and I want to be a servant. I want to serve people and love people with my music and my person.” It’s not a leap to say that Bach felt the same.

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