

Apollo's Fire: Bach "Family Frolic" at CIM's Mixon Hall (January 22)

by Daniel Hathaway



Apollo's Fire's "Fireside Concerts" this season gather audiences around the hypothetical hearth of the Bach family in Leipzig (before moving on to Zimmermann's Coffee House). Music by Johann Christian (1735-1782) Wilhelm Friedmann (1710-1784) and Papa Bach himself feature the talented members of the ensemble's Young Artist Apprentice Program performing alongside AF regulars, with a special appearance by three even younger members of Apollo's Musettes.

The light-hearted, 90-minute concert in CIM's Mixon Hall on Thursday evening culminated in a cleverly staged

performance of Johann Sebastian's amusing "Coffee Cantata," BWV 211. The piece featured soprano Madeline Apple Healey as the coffee-addicted Lieschen, baritone Jeffrey Strauss as her despairing daddy, Herr Schlendrian, and apprentice tenor Corey Shotwell as Herr Zimmermann, the fretful proprietor of the coffee house that bears his name (and probably the venue where the comic cantata was first performed during the early 1730s).

The "fourth wall" came down abruptly right at the end of the brief intermission when Zimmermann hurried onstage and moved into the audience with his broom, sweeping up and trying to get the crowd to stop nattering and take their seats. He fussed around Jeannette Sorrell and the small onstage orchestra while the director was trying to speak to the audience, then launched straight into the opening recitative that introduced the two squabbling characters.

Jeffrey Strauss perfectly captured the personality of Schlendrian — bumbling and at his wits' end — singing with excellent diction and a fine sense of comedy. Healey's strong, clear voice and supple delivery beautifully suited the frequently ornate music Bach wrote for Lieschen, and her acting fit the character of a dizzy daughter like a glove. Sorrell's imaginative staging brought the instrumental ensemble into the action and sometimes coyly made good fun of itself. The alternating, deep-knee bends of the three children (Will Burleigh, David Ricci and Anna Turner) was eventually mocked by the adult singers in the final chorus.

The cantata was sung in English to a new translation by Jeannette Sorrell. It's always difficult to fit 21st century English to 18th century German music and make it sound natural, but Sorrell succeeded, with a few exceptions. When the narrator sees Schlendrian storming in at the beginning, he's supposed to sing, "Er brummt ja wie ein Zeidelbär" ("He growls like a dancing bear"). Bach underlined that with a musical gesture, but on Thursday, that funny detail went missing.

The instrumental ensemble for the cantata (string quartet headed up by concertmaster Karina Schmitz, plus harpsichord) was crowned by the excellent traverso playing of AF apprentice Sarah Lynn, who came front and center for the obbligato in Lieschen's first aria, and did a bit of acting herself when she wasn't busy playing.

Put up against the music of his children, Johann Sebastian Bach always takes top honors in the family composition contest. Johann Christian's *Flute Quartet in C* and *Lovely yet ungrateful swain* from the Vauxhall Songs are charming to hear but easy to forget, mirroring as they do a vast amount of music from the early classical period. But Kathie Stewart's expert traverso playing and Madeline Apple Healey's expressive singing lifted these two pieces up several levels in interest. Traverso players Stewart and Lynn, who are mother and daughter, joined forces for the Vauxhall piece.

Wilhelm Friedmann's solo harpsichord *Fantasia in d* and *Triosonata in D* were similarly beguiling but evanescent. Sorrell expressively shaped the improvisatory fantasia, and apprentice violinists Cynthia Black and Augusta McKay-Lodge joined veteran cellist René Schiffer for a fine performance of the sonata. But the finale from Johann Sebastian's *Violinsonata in d*, brightly played by Sorrell in a transcription for harpsichord eclipsed all four of his son's pieces, even though it embraced an earlier, "outdated" style.

Curiously missing from the family musicale was Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, the most promising member of the younger generation. Also missing was Mama Bach, Anna Maria Magdalena, who was an accomplished singer. It might have been fun to include a song from the matriarch's musical scrapbook.

“Family Frolic” will be repeated on Friday, January 23 at 8:00 pm at First Methodist Church in Akron, on Saturday, January 24 at 8:00 pm at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights, and on Sunday, January 25 at 4:00 pm at Rocky River Presbyterian Church in Rocky River.

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