

Baldwin Wallace Bach Festival Opening Concert (April 17)



by Timothy Robson

A new era began this weekend for the revered Baldwin Wallace Bach Festival, now in its 83rd season, with a new artistic director, Dirk Garner, and orchestral conductor Octavio Más-Arocas. In any such transition the new regime has the opportunity to assess tradition and determine the direction forward. If the first concert of the 2015 festival on Friday, April 17, in BW's Gamble Auditorium, is any indication, the organization is in good hands, with a vivid sense of imagination and purpose, yet not losing track of the past.

The Baldwin Wallace Symphony Orchestra and Festival Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Más-Arocas, gave a lively and provocative concert of mostly contemporary music based on or inspired by the works of Johann Sebastian Bach. A lovely performance of a Bach solo cantata was in the mix for good measure. Each work was imbued with a sense of theatricality, sometimes literally, other times metaphorically.

Funeral Music for Queen Mary (after Purcell), by American composer Steven Stucky (b. 1949) opened the program with a slow procession by a brass quartet and snare drum

down the darkened auditorium aisle playing the march from Henry Purcell's own *Funeral Music for Queen Mary*, preceded by dancers carrying (fake) candles. The full ensemble of winds, brass and percussion takes over the march and develops it, accompanied by huge pounding hits on a large bass drum. The music morphs into an arrangement of the anthem "In the Midst of Life We Are in Death." The music becomes more chromatic and "hazy" with the lines overlapping and drifting apart. The march returns at the end, in a blazing chorale, with thundering on the bass drum. It made a powerful, almost frightening impression.

Bach's Cantata No. 170, *Vergnügte Ruh, beliebte Seelenlust*, featured the fine young countertenor Eric Jurenas and a chamber ensemble of strings, oboe, continuo and solo organ. The text is drawn from the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus exhorts his followers to love one another. Jurenas has a bright, light voice, and he easily negotiated the wide *tessitura* of the solo part. The intricate solo organ part sparkled as played by BW organ faculty member Nicole Keller on the sweet-sounding Ruggles continuo organ. Accompanying the music was LottDance, a quartet of modern dancers, who performed during all four movements of the cantata, expressing a variety of moods, choreographed by Jennifer McQuiston Lott. Others can judge the quality of the choreography. My eyes (and ears) were more drawn to the musicians. With both dancers and musicians on the relatively small stage, there was almost too much visual stimulation.

The brilliant second half of the program took some of J.S. Bach's most famous works and subjected them to modern treatment. *Headless Snowman* by Tom Trapp (b. 1980) was wild, based on the two-part Invention in F Major. The piece is scored for trap drum set, electric guitar, improvised saxophone solos, trombone and piano, plus a string orchestra. The arpeggiated upward theme of the invention was contorted every which way to hilarious ends. The audience applauded the jazz soloists during the progress of the piece, whose title did not seem to have any particular meaning.

Bach did not live to complete the last fugue of *Der Kunst der Fuge (The Art of Fugue)*. The huge fugue on three subjects—one of which is based on Bach's own name, B-A-C-H spelled out in German pitches — is identified by several numbering schemes, but in Luciano Berio's version, it is called *Contrapunctus XIX*. Other editors have written completions from the lines where Bach trailed off, while many performers just stop where Bach ended. No mere orchestration, Berio's piece reduces the four fugue voices to their essence, breaking them into bits and pieces and scattering them around the orchestra. Reassembled, the lines take on the aspect of a musical kaleidoscope, with brass, wind and string snippets magically connected. At the point where Bach left off, Berio's counterpoint disintegrates into a softly dissonant musical cloud, dissipating into silence. Octavio Más-Arocas and his mostly student orchestra (supplemented with faculty) caught the contradictory complexity and simplicity of Berio's reconstruction of Bach's master fugue.

Arvo Pärt's *Collage on B-A-C-H* is an early work, composed before Pärt adopted his “tintinnabuli” style. It is strikingly dissonant and modernist for those of us who are used to the simple, austere tonality of Pärt's more recent music. The work is in three short movements, all based on music by Bach. The first has elements of minimalism in its steady pulsations. The second pits a plaintive oboe solo against strings and harpsichord, followed by clusters of notes in the strings moving in rhythms reinforced by the piano. At the end, the oboe solo returns, but accompanied by string clusters that sounded uncannily like an accordion with a leak in its bellows. The third movement is both traditional and severely modernist, a fugue on B-A-C-H, ultimately ending on a bright major chord.

The program closer, Ottorino Respighi's 1929 transcription of Bach's organ *Prelude and Fugue in D*, BWV 532, was like a gigantic blast of sunlight after the Berio and Pärt works. There was nothing fancy: Bach's organ piece was given a straightforward Romantic treatment, in the manner of Leopold Stokowski's famous orchestral arrangements. Respighi seems a natural for this sort of thing, given his technicolor orchestrations in tone poems such as *Pines of Rome*. Indeed, this arrangement almost seemed too earnest, like an undergraduate orchestration student trying to please his professor. Nonetheless, it was great fun, played with panache by the BW performers. It left this listener feeling optimistic about the BW Bach Festival, which promises to have a bright future.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com April 21, 2015.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)