

Apollo's Fire: Bach in the Countryside at Baroque Music Barn in Hunting Valley (June 12)

by Daniel Hathaway



When you live in a climate like Cleveland's (or Leipzig's, for that matter), at the first sign of moderating weather, you want to take your activities out-of-doors — rain, bugs, wind and humidity be damned. In Leipzig, Johann Sebastian Bach led summer concerts in Zimmermann's Kaffegarten. In Hunting Valley last week, Jeannette Sorrell led two concerts in the "Baroque Music Barn" at the intersection of Shaker Boulevard and Chagrin River Road. On those occasions, the building formerly used to store apples rang out with the music of Bach and Telemann, including a thorny trio sonata, a requiem for a canary, and a virtuoso concerto.

Events in the Barn are semi-*al fresco*.

There's a roof over the performers' and audience's heads, but the end doors of the loft space are open to the charms (and occasional incursions) of nature. No bats visited the proceedings, but humidity and the odd rain shower made themselves known. It can't have been completely comfortable for period string instruments — or for the harpsichord — but though the performers had to tune more often than usual, the performances were of consistently high quality. It was fun to be almost outside.

Artistic director Jeannette Sorrell decided to present Bach's Trio Sonata from *A Musical Offering* in two installments, the first two movements at the beginning, the last two following intermission. The piece was written as a present for the flute-playing monarch of Prussia, Frederick the Great, following a visit to Potsdam where the king challenged Bach to improvise on a striking theme. That inspired Bach to compose two fugues and a series of brainy puzzle canons, plus the Trio Sonata, whose third movement tips its hat to the new *gallant* style favored by the younger generation of Bachs.

Unfortunately, the key of c-minor is not very friendly for the baroque flute, requiring the performer to overcome a number of awkward challenges, including being heard over the violin and harpsichord. Flutist Kathie Stewart — wearing an earpiece microphone apparently for sound reinforcement — managed to cut through the often complicated musical texture except in the lowest range of her instrument. Stewart, violinist Olivier Brault, cellist Rebecca Landell Reed, and harpsichordist Sorrell dashed the first two movements off with flair, easily meeting their technical challenges.

Telemann's *Funeral Cantata for an Artistically Trained Canary-Bird whose Demise brought the Greatest Sorrow to his Master* is a charming mock-requiem that was brought vividly to life by tenor Ross Hauck with the help of a bird cage and a few other props (but no cat, who was the cause of the canary's demise). Hauck sang brilliantly, as usual, agreeably hamming up his role in the obsequies. "To hell with felines...I wish somebody would tie a noose around your neck," he sang at the end, in Sorrell's own English translation of the libretto.

After a lovely performance of Telemann's "Chaconne Modéré" from the twelfth *Paris Quartet*, the trio completed the *Musical Offering* sonata in a thrilling flurry of notes and turned to Bach's fifth "Brandenburg" concerto to top off the evening.

Here, Bach wrote in a much more agreeable key for the *traverso*, and Kathie Stewart had the opportunity to sing out and shine. Apart from some mannered phrasing (odd lifts before downbeats in the middle of phrases), Stewart, Brault, and Sorrell, backed up by a quartet of strings, gave a strong, accomplished account of one of Bach's most joyous works. Sorrell, who prefaced the performance by characterizing the famous harpsichord cadenza as "almost an athletic feat," tossed it off fearlessly and won a big round of applause at the end of the first movement.

Photo: an earlier photo of the trio with cellist René Schiffer.

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