

Olivier Brault and the Akron Symphony: a dialogue of traditions (January 16)

by Christine Jay



Thankfully not all old traditions die hard. On January 16 in the University of Akron's E. J. Thomas Hall, music director Christopher Wilkins, baroque violinist Olivier Brault, and the Akron Symphony presented a concert entitled "Vivaldi and Bach — The Great Inspiration." An intermingling of historical and modern performance traditions ensued, with inspiring results.

The evening began with a bang in J. S. Bach's *Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D*. Glorious but overpowering, the trumpets often overwhelmed the small chamber orchestra of strings and oboes conducted by Wilkins. Although engulfed, the string section played smoothly and cohesively, especially during the famous Air.

Farther into the suite, especially within the Bourée, the harpsichord timbre cut through the texture with an unpleasant, mechanical tone — a fault of the instrument, not the player. The suite ended with a repetitive Gigue that caused the mind to wander.

Stirring things up, Olivier Brault strode onto the stage with a highly energized presence. He began Vivaldi's *Violin Concerto in c* with a large gesture, often facing the orchestra to provide convivial leadership as both conductor and soloist. The Largo was meditative in style and cohesive in sound, with Brault not only leading but also adapting to the ensemble. A Vivaldian furor ensued with the ferocious Allegro non molto, Brault taking no prisoners and relishing every moment in what was his first memorized, public performance of the work.

Continuing with Vivaldi, concertmaster Alan Bodman joined Brault for an enjoyable performance of the *Concerto for two violins in a*. Here, a conversation between the Baroque and modern performance practices seemed to occur: Brault used minimal vibrato until the end of each note while Bodman vibrated continuously on every note. A giddy, crowd-pleasing *Allegro* followed.

After a gratifying intermission, during which the intergenerational audience could enjoy beverages and desserts, the program continued with Bach's a-minor Violin Concerto, a contrapuntal confection that was most similar to the Vivaldi pieces on the program. The Andante provided a nuanced, subdued melancholy while the third movement brought smiles to Brault's countenance. Bizarrely, the audience giggled at every stage reset, a frequent phenomenon throughout the evening.

The highlight of the evening was Vivaldi's *Concerto for Two Violins and Cello in d*, particularly excellent for the cohesive sound of Brault and his fellow soloists, violinist Linda Nagy Johnston and cellist Miles Richardson. A reflective Largo with solos by Brault proved especially enjoyable.

Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 4 in G* was an uplifting end to the program. The modern once again conversed with the Baroque when the traditional recorders were replaced with modern flutes. Although this seemed strange at first, soloists Barbara O'Brien and Kyra Kester played with a pleasing, mellow quality that functioned well next to Brault, his modern violin strung with baroque "gut" strings. The final Presto provided a stirring finish to an inspiring concert of dialogues between old and modern conventions and musical traditions.

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