

Apollo's Fire: "Virtuoso Bach" in Rocky River (February 19)

by Robert Rollin



This past week Apollo's Fire, Cleveland's Baroque orchestra conducted by Jeannette Sorrell, presented five performances of its "Virtuoso Bach" program. Sunday afternoon's performance at Rocky River Presbyterian Church benefitted visually from the church's lovely setting, but the high ceiling and wide space created a rather muddy acoustic that at times affected the clarity of sound.

Although at times oboists Debra Nagy and Kathryn Montoya struggled to be heard, the performance of Bach's *Orchestral Suite in C Major* was otherwise excellent. With its slow beginning and scintillating fugue, the *Ouverture* is followed by a succession of short and charmingly inventive dances. A rustic Italian *Forlane*, in a lively triple meter, bisects the

seven-movement piece. Short da capos kept the dance performances lively and interesting. The audience responded warmly.

As recorder player and flutist Kathie Stewart explained in her interesting pre-concert lecture, the Oboe Concerto in g, BWV 1056R is actually a recasting of a lost work that appeared as an f-minor harpsichord concerto during Bach's later Leipzig period. Since he no longer enjoyed the cadre of talented wind and string soloists he had at Cöthen, he transformed older works as solo vehicles for himself and his children.

Oboist Debra Nagy played with fine expression and skill. The spritely first movement emphasizes the soloist's lower and middle registers. At times the strings overbalanced her, both here and in the rapid last movement. In contrast, the Largo was wondrously transparent and expressive, the pizzicato accompaniment supporting her beautiful, singing line.

The highpoint of the afternoon was an exceptional performance of Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 4*. The brilliant soloists, violinist Olivier Brault and recorder players Francis Colpron and Kathie Stewart, made the most of Bach's concertino/ripieno structure, exchanging melodies and interacting with the larger accompanying group.

Brault's rapid and fiery figuration alternated and interweaved with the recorders' gorgeously-timbered echo entrances. The balance was excellent throughout, and Sorrell and cellist René Schiffer provided fine continuo accompaniment. Conversational interplay among soloists and orchestra was exquisite in the middle Andante. Brault's rapid solos were magnificent and graceful in the blazing Presto.

Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G for nine strings opened the afternoon concert. The wonderful surging quality of the first movement was lacking, and Sorrell's somewhat mannered treatment of phrasing and ritardandos sometimes acted against the musical flow.

The middle Adagio featured beautiful solos in the strings and an attractive harpsichord solo. The Allegro surged like the wind. Ascending and descending scalar passages sparkled and made for a rousing conclusion.

The only work by a composer other than Bach was Georg Philipp Telemann's *Concerto Grosso in b*. Transverse flute soloists Kathie Stewart and Francis Colpron were terrific in their intricate parts during the Grave and Vivace movements. The charming Vivace certainly justified Telemann's great popularity in his day.

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