

Apollo's Fire: "Violin Fantasy" at St. Paul's, Cleveland Hts. (Nov. 14)

by Daniel Hathaway



It's fun and illuminating to trace outside influences on composers' changing styles as they make their way through life, standing on the shoulders of their predecessors to see a clearer view of the future.

Sometimes it's easier to document those influences than others. The subtitle of Apollo's Fire's recent program set, "Tracing the Path from Biber to Bach," implied that the music of Johann Sebastian Bach marked the end point of a stylistic era that more or less developed in a straight line from late-17th century violinist-composers like Heinrich

Ignaz Franz Biber through Dietrich Buxtehude and Johann Adam Reinken to the Cantor of Leipzig.

Things don't actually work out so neatly, and the path through the late 17th and early 18th century is complicated by experiments that had their day but ultimately added little to the evolution of violin music. On Sunday afternoon, November 14 at St. Paul's Church in Cleveland Heights, violinist and director *du jour* Alan Choo assembled an engaging survey of a hundred years' worth of fiddling that touched on many interesting developments — but left the phenomenon of JSB a delicious continuing mystery.

Choo and his colleagues — violinist Emi Tanabe, violist Yael Senamaud-Cohen, cellist and violist da gamba René Schiffer, theorbist William Sims, harpsichordist

Jeannette Sorrell, and organist Peter Bennett — snuck into the program with Johann Heinrich Schmelzer's *Sonata Pastorella*, which seemed to grow organically out of the ensemble's tuning ritual and introduced the "Representational" Style familiar to audiences in works like Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*.

Two of Biber's 16 "Mystery" or "Rosary" Sonatas contrasted traditional tuning of the violin's open strings (G-D-A-E in "The Annunciation") with *scordatura* (in this case A-E-A-E in "The Visitation"), which subtly change the resonance of the instrument. These sonatas also introduced the idea of the *Stylus Fantasticus*, free, virtuosic flights of fancy contrasted with more conventional contrapuntal writing. Choo put them across with easy but dazzling technique.

A Pachelbel suite, a Bach cello Sarabande, and a Buxtehude duet sung by soprano Rebecca Myers and mezzo-soprano Elisa Sutherland closed the first half. Part two began with the second Biber Sonata, led on to a Johann Adam Reinken *Sonata* (including its Adagio movement in Bach's arrangement for solo harpsichord), and finally featured the two singers and the full ensemble in a curiosity: selections from Bach's parody of Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*, made in Leipzig in 1746 for reasons unknown.

In the end, too few examples of Bach's developing style were offered to support the argument of the program, although each work was performed with the clarity, precision, and passion that have become synonymous with Apollo's Fire. The vocal pieces were particularly expressive.

But where *did* Bach come from? Perhaps in future programs we'll hear some missing links that help answer that question.

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