

Apollo's Fire at Lakewood Methodist — “Fire & Joy: from Bach & Vivaldi” (Nov. 17)

by Daniel Hathaway



Baroque music reaches some of its loftiest heights in concertos, and those by Antonio Vivaldi (who left us some 500) and Johann Sebastian Bach (who seeded his cantatas with concerto-like movements, wrote a collection of six famous concertos, and rearranged — or lost — goodness knows how many others) are among the most

popular with ensembles like Apollo's Fire.

On Friday, November 17, the ensemble brought its program “Fire & Joy: from Bach & Vivaldi” to Lakewood Methodist Church as a stop on its local tour that included performances in Akron, Cleveland Heights, and University Circle. Artistic Director Jeannette Sorrell chose concertos by Vivaldi and Bach, pairing them with brief Bach cantata sinfonias.

The concert began with Vivaldi's D-minor Double Violin Concerto — which Bach arranged for organ during his time at Weimar, when Italian orchestra concertos were all the rage. Soloists Alan Choo and Edwin Huizinga brought plenty of fire to their assignment, setting daredevil tempi at the beginning as they chased each other up and down d-minor scale passages, and inspiring cellist René Schiffer to brief bursts of virtuosity.

And joy? The energetic third-movement fugue subject and ebullient finale sparked that commodity even in a key normally associated with darker emotions. The lovely little fourth movement, “Largo e spiccato,” provided a brief rest stop.

The gently dotted rhythms of the Sinfonia for strings from the wedding Cantata BWV 196 introduced one of those rearranged concertos. Oboist Debra Nagy was outstanding as soloist in Bach's F-Major Concerto, which musicological detectives believe to be an early version of the extant E-Major Harpsichord Concerto. On a day of violent weather changes that could cause many double reed players to speak gruffly to their reeds or reconsider their career choice, Nagy sounded sonorous and splendid.

After intermission came Bach's Sinfonia to the early cantata BWV 152 for flute, oboe, viola d'amore, and viola da gamba, which served to introduce Nicole Divall (pictured above) and her viola d'amore before both were featured in one of Vivaldi's eight concerti for that special instrument (its non-bowed strings under the fingerboard are tuned to vibrate in sympathy with their active colleagues above).

The d'amore seemingly enchants every player who takes it up, and it made a very sweet sound under Divall's bow and fingers — a feature bolstered by those resonating strings. Both her playing and interpretation of the Concerto in d (RV 394) were refreshingly healthy and unaffected, and she was unfazed when her foot pedal failed to turn the page on her iPad. A moment of silence and a swift kick put everything back to rights.

Finally, Bach's Sinfonia from Cantata 182, a lovely meeting of solo violin and recorder, brought Alan Choo and Daphna Mor into a conversation over plucked strings as an introduction to Bach's Concerto in G, BWV 1049.

This is the fourth of the six concertos that Bach gifted to the Margrave of Brandenburg, who put them on a shelf where they remained until discovered by a scholar in 1849. Starring recorder players Daphna Mor and Kathie Stewart and violinist Alan Choo, it ended Friday's program joyfully, with bright but reasonable tempi and generally admirable ensemble playing between the soloists and orchestra.

This was the second recent Apollo's Fire concert in venues that proved to be problematic acoustically. Wide stages dissipated the sound, and some inner detail went missing. The fourth stop on their current itinerary was University Circle Methodist, which Apollo's Fire is apparently trying out for future performances.

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