

Apollo's Fire: "Hope and Solitude" featuring countertenor Reginald Mobley (Nov. 17)

by Daniel Hathaway



Apollo's Fire concertmaster and assistant artistic director Alan Choo curated an thoughtful, unusual, and thoroughly engaging program at Rocky River Presbyterian Church on Sunday afternoon, November 17.

Featuring the formidable vocal gifts of countertenor Reginald Mobley, the program managed to gather under a single banner

an orchestral suite and other selections by Henry Purcell, lute music by John Dowland, a suite by John Eccles, and an aria from J.S. Bach's "Hunting" cantata as well as his solo cantata *Ich habe genug*. The well-attended concert ended with Spirituals that fit remarkably well into a menu of music played on period instruments.

In his director's notes, Alan Choo wrote that this program "epitomizes the universality of music and its ability to uplift, heal, and revitalize the human spirit," quoting the text of 17th-century Anglo-Welsh royalist poet Katherine Phillips' *O Solitude* as set by Henry Purcell:

*Oh, how I solitude adore!
That element of noblest wit
Where I have learned Apollo's lore
Without the pains to study it.*

After the ensemble played Purcell's Suite from *The Gordian Knot Unty'd* (an overture and tunes from each of the four acts of a play for which only the music survives) and his regal *Three Parts on a Ground*, a theorbo solo led into Mobley's evocative singing of *O Solitude* accompanied only by continuo instruments. His pure voice that shows no breaks

in register and the perfect diction of a born storyteller promised wonderful things to come later in the program.

A beautifully styled arrangement of John Dowland's *Fortune my foe* for two lutes played by Brandon Acker and William Simms and a swaggering performance of the *Earl of Essex Galliard* paved the way for another Restoration theatrical suite, this one from John Eccles' *The Mad Lover* demonstrating a pervasive British melancholy. Again, the whole ensemble got into the act, Choo and Debra Nagy trading jovial violin and oboe lines, and Choo setting up a final Jigg.

The scenario changed completely after intermission with an arrangement of Pales' aria from J.S. Bach's Cantata 208, *Was mir behagt*, best known as "Sheep may safely graze." After hearing it in so many arrangements, it was a treat to revisit the original orchestration for two recorders (Daphna Mor and Debra Nagy) and continuo (Jeannette Sorrell at the harpsichord), but with the vocal line played by solo cello (Sarah Stone).



The main event on Sunday was J.S. Bach's solo cantata *Ich habe genug*, with Reginald Mobley singing the role of Simeon and Debra Nagy as oboe soloist. Written for the Feast of the Purification in the fourth year of Bach's cantorate in Leipzig, the work's three arias feature some of the composer's most inventive and expressive writing.

At the beginning of the opening movement, Bach intertwines florid violin and oboe lines over an undulating accompaniment before the solo voice joins the ensemble to sing of Simeon's desire to depart this life after holding the Savior in his arms.

Mobley's interpretation was pure magic in the middle aria, which Bach borrowed from himself — or rather from the Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach. After contrasting sections where he showed the beauty of his lower register, he adroitly snuck back into the main theme several times, sometimes *sotto voce*.

In the final aria, *Ich freue mich auf meine Tod*, Mobley and the instrumentalists set a brisk tempo and locked into a tight ensemble that never unravelled.

Not so far as it might seem from the sentiments expressed in *Ich habe genug*, the program ended with two valedictory Spirituals sung by Reginald Mobley with heartfelt devotion in expressive arrangements by Apollo's Fire. *Wayfaring Stranger* and *My Lord*,

What a Morning hopefully sent the audience out into a troubled world armed with the emotional strength to journey to a brighter land.

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