

Mozart Players give the baroque a good name

Those who don't enjoy the period's music haven't heard it by candlelight

By Marilyn Farwell For The Register-Guard

Published: December 12, 2007

Several years ago, a critic from The New York Times suggested the classical world declare a moratorium on baroque music. Not only did it all seem alike, but it was constantly streamed into the backgrounds of restaurants, shopping malls and upscale grocery stores. How many times can one hear Antonio Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons" on the elevator and not want relief?

But this critic probably never attended the Oregon Mozart Players' annual Baroque for the Holidays Candlelight Concert. If he had, he might want to cut baroque music some slack.

The ambience is the first thing that he would notice. Monday's concert in the First Christian Church was staged with an abundance of candles, low light, a Christmas tree on the side, and the warm wood of the church surrounding the audience. Not only does it remind everyone of Christmas, but with the lighted candles and small orchestra of 14 it also evokes the atmosphere of a real concert in the baroque period.

That critic also would be struck by the variety of selections on the program. Far from being all the same, the offerings included an Italian concerto grosso, a French suite, a German cantata and a modernized version of a baroque adagio.

Of course, he also would notice the excellent music-making, conductor Glen Cortese's attention to detail and the virtuosity of the soloists.

Baroque music is all about the contrasts between several different instrumental groups or between soloists and orchestral strings. The Mozart Players performed one of G.F. Handel's concerti grossi with some nice subtleties, highlighting the echo effect of repeated sections. The piece featured the excellent playing of two violinists, concertmaster Alice Blankenship and principal second Yvonne Hsueh.

In the second work, Georg Philipp Telemann's French suite of dances for strings and two solo French horns, the buttery sound of the horns was set against the transparent sound of the strings. David Kruse and Lydia Van Dreel played the hunting call sounds with panache.

Vivaldi's concerto for flute and strings provided an entirely different kind of experience.

Baroque composers liked to imitate words and sounds, and in this case Vivaldi chose to have the flute, and sometimes the violins, mime bird calls. Jill Pauls, the solo flutist, was impressive as one of our feathered friends. Neither Vivaldi's title, "Il Cardellino," nor a bird expert sitting next to me could determine the species.

The second portion of the concert began with a modernized version of Tomaso Albinoni's Adagio in G Minor. A familiar piece, it was expanded by the warm, full sounds of the strings and the deep organ swells from John Jantzi's playing. This work took the audience to another space, not that of the opaque baroque sound, but the 19th and 20th centuries' preference for heavier, romantic pieces.

The final work was the largest and most challenging: J.S. Bach's "Wedding Cantata."

Written for a single soprano soloist and the orchestra, it contains five recitatives and five arias. It is as demanding as most operatic music of the time, which means florid passages, dramatic recitatives and spun out legato lines.

Natalie Gunn, a young soprano from Portland, seemed undaunted. She had an animated stage presence and a clear, direct vocal sound with some steel around the edges. She handled the florid music well; less so the legato portions.

Gunn's tendency to approach some notes with a straight tone, allowing the vibrato to appear only afterward, was distracting.

The most compelling aria was the last one, "Seid beglückt," which Gunn sang impressively with the solo flute, played by Pauls, and the oboe d'amore, played by Cheryl Denice, dancing to the words of "Live in bliss, noble couple."

Our critic who called for a moratorium on baroque music might now have second thoughts. I would simply rest my case.

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