Concert Reviews (2011–2017)

From 2011 through 2017 I occasionally reviewed concerts for the online *Boston Musical Intelligencer*, imagining that by offering commentary on local performances I might provide information about the music for listeners and helpful suggestions for performers and presenters. But of course this was quixotic, not to say presumptuous, and on the rare occasions when my reviews solicited comments these were usually to complain about their length, or about my criticisms of anachronistic performance practices and inaccurate claims in program notes. I discovered, too, that as a performer myself, and one who knew and has worked with and even taught some of those I found myself reviewing, it could be difficult to preserve my objectivity or to avoid offending people. An additional frustration was that many of my reviews appeared with editorial changes that introduced not only grammatical errors and misspellings but sometimes misstatements of fact, even altering the views I had expressed. I know that few things are as stale as old reviews, but for the record I include below all these reviews as I wrote them, arranged by date of publication from the most recent to the earliest. At some point I learned that it was preferable to invent a cute-sounding headline than to have one foisted on my review, and where I did this I've placed it within quotation marks in the heading or on a separate line (followed by my byline). A few of these reviews are accompanied by photos that I took, although the only one of these that ran originally was that of the Resistance protest in Copley Square in January 2017.

David Schulenberg
December 19, 2017

American Modern Opera Company (December 17, 2017)

A Night Out With AMOC
David Schulenberg

The new American Modern Opera Company was unveiled this week in a series of three events billed as the AMOC! Festival, sponsored by the American Repertory Theater. The company is a collaboration between composers, dancers, and performing musicians, with the composer-conductor Matthew Aucoin and choreographer-dancer Zack Winokur listed as artistic directors. I attended the second event, entitled "Cage Match," Saturday night at the Oberon Theater in Cambridge.

The aim of this venture seems to be to rethink performance as well as opera. Making the most of their acronym, their website is called runningamoc.org, and they declare in the program booklet that "we define opera as the medium in which multiple art forms collide and transform each other." Opera in the traditional sense was barely present in the performance Saturday night, which consisted of six mostly short sets or selections whose origins ran from the early Baroque to earlier this year. Each involved two performers—hence the event title, which referred to a variety of professional wrestling (a theatrical genre of which few of the sold-out crowd of mostly middle-aged Cantabrigians are likely to be fans). In fact the allusion to fake pugilism proved somewhat misleading, and I'm not sure whether the roughly forty-five minutes of actual music and dance added up to much that was really new.

I confess that my own interest in the evening was largely to see what the prodigiously talented Aucoin, whose opera *Crossing* was premiered two years ago by A.R.T., was up to. Two two-piano pieces by himself and John Adams, which he performed together with Conor Hanick, proved the most substantial portion of the evening, bookending a series of briefer works. These included duets by Telemann, Bartók, and the twentieth-century Italian composer Franco Donatoni, all played by violinists Miranda Cuckson and Keir GoGwilt. The penultimate item was an adaptation of a scene from Monteverdi's *Incoronazione di Poppea* involving countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo and dancer Winokur.

Following a trend that treats classical music as no different from any form of commercial entertainment, the evening's musical selections were preceded by raucous introductions in the manner of a pro wrestling event, with "hosts" Or Schraiber and Bobbi Jene Smith respectively yelling into a microphone and sauntering about in various more or less tasteful outfits. This was in keeping with the night's official theme and perhaps with its venue: the Oberon is essentially a black-box theater with a bar, and those attending were seated at tables and invited to buy drinks before and after the performance. Loudly piped-in rap music greeted this reviewer on entrance, and together with the silly staging this might have desensitized ears for careful listening. But this was forgotten once the program began, although "Bobbi and Or" (as they were identified in the program) continued to make appearances between selections.

One product of this approach is to upstage the music itself. Theatrical lighting (spotlights on the performers, disco lights revolving during the concluding John Adams piece) meant that the printed programs were unreadable, and as composers' names were never mentioned in the introductions, anyone curious about the music, as opposed to the performances, would have had a hard time knowing exactly what they were hearing. The cleverness of the famous "Gulliver's Travels" suite by Telemann, with its musical references to Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians, could not have been evident to many listeners, and without a text or translation the Italian of the Monteverdi scene must have been incomprehensible to most. Uncertainty as to when to applaud was another result, as few could tell whether a pause marked the end of a set or merely of a movement.

A brief program note by Aucoin described his new *Finery Forge* as “music of brute force, a series of pounding G-sharp-minor chords that slowly begins to ‘melt’ and to shoot sparks off in every direction.” The title, with its reference to an old industrial process for refining iron, did not seem entirely reflected in the music, perhaps because it was played with greater discretion, if not exactly delicacy, than the composer’s own description led one to expect. The piece nevertheless seemed a spin-off of 1970s minimalism, dominated by the familiar motoric pulsation and treating the two pianos as a single instrument to produce occasionally novel sonorities. One must listen to a composition like this more than once to be sure, but on first hearing it did not live up to the program-note hype. John Adams’s *Hallelujah Junction* of 1998, with which the program ended, is a longer and more varied example of the same idiom, rendered interesting by a more rapid rate of change in both sonority and rhythm and by the occasional presence of short solos for one pianist or the other.

Minimalism is actually a misnomer for this type of piece, for in its use of time it is *maximal*, taking ten or fifteen minutes to say what another composer might do in a space one tenth as long. By contrast, the three sets of violin duets, despite their diverse styles, were united by their composers’ refusal to carry on longer than necessary. The first comprised a single piece, Donatoni’s *Duetto II*, written five years before the composer’s death in 2000 (the composer’s first *Duetto* of 1975 is for harpsichord). This was a series of short, quiet vignettes, each highlighting one or two new-music sorts of violin sound: wispy arabesques, chirpy trills, and the like. As in the piano pieces, the two instruments tend to work as one to produce otherwise unobtainable sonorities, but again there was not much combat or even playful back-and-forth between the two performers.

The situation changed in the Bartók: five selections from his 44 Duos of 1931 (nos. 32, 38, 40, 41, and 43). Within the program these stood out for their lack of pretension and the composer’s economy of means, and despite their pedagogic character they struck this listener as real gems. Within their confined dimensions they also reveal genuine counterpoint and contrast between the two parts. It did not hurt that Cuckson and GoGwilt here demonstrated especially fine duo-violin playing, with beautifully matched bowing and phrasing and near-perfect intonation. Much the same could be said of the playing in the five little movements of the Telemann suite. Here, however, the composer’s musical humor was obscured by the players’ not very convincing pretense of being angry at one another, and by their dropping the pages of music on the floor rather than turning them—unnecessary concessions to the theme of the evening.

The Monteverdi scene might have been the one truly innovative performance of the evening, but it was problematic for this viewer. The scene occurs early in the opera at dawn as the emperor Nero and his mistress Poppea take leave of one another. Aucoin, in his program note, asserts that the original scoring (for male and female sopranos) “strongly suggests same-sex desire, or at least a bending of gender roles”—well, maybe to a modern viewer, although the same has been argued more convincingly of a later scene in the opera between Nero and the poet Lucan. Acting on the view expressed by Aucoin, the company staged this as a sort of duet in which countertenor Costanzo sang both Nero’s and Poppea’s lines while dancer Winokur intertwined with him, set him on the floor and spun him about, and (during one of the more aria-like passages) danced an expressive solo.

Evidently the identities of the two characters, and of the performers, were supposed to merge, and as an abstract representation of that idea the staging was perhaps a success. But the absence of Monteverdi’s instrumental accompaniment—Costanzo sang the long scene as a solo—left the music incomplete, obscuring the alternation between recitative and aria, which is essential to the scene as usually performed. One might have expected the distinction between discursive recitative and dance-like aria to

be reflected in the choreography, but if so it was not obvious in most cases to this non-dancer. Costanzo sang valiantly while pressed into even more of the vocally non-ergonomic poses than has become usual in contemporary opera staging, and it is possible that the performance would make more sense if seen a second time. But on this occasion it seemed merely strange if technically impressive.

Given the depth of talent in the company they surely are capable of great things. The actual dance and music Saturday night were impeccably performed, but after subtracting the stagy presentation it was a light-weight offering, and only occasionally did the program involve the competition or interaction between duettists that was supposed to unify the diverse selections. At the end, the “hosts” invited everyone to drink and dance, giving the impression that AMOC was a warm-up for an evening’s fun and games. I hope that future performances will skip the trendy packaging even at the risk of appearing to present opera (in whatever form) seriously.

C. P. E. Bach Tower Festival Music at King's Chapel Boston (October 30, 2017)

Bach and Bach at King's Chapel
David Schulenberg

The sixtieth season of the King's Chapel Concert Series opened Sunday afternoon with Bach's Magnificat, on a program that also included a major choral work by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel. The latter, receiving its first American performance, was a cantata long thought irretrievably lost, then rediscovered together with many other such works in Kyiv in 1999 (as described here). Heinrich Christensen directed the seventeen-strong King's Chapel Choir together with an orchestra also comprising seventeen players.

The "new" work, which opened the program, was officially titled *Musik am Dankfeste wegen des fertigen Michaelisturms*—Music for the Festival of Thanks upon the Completion of the Tower of St. Michael's Church. It was created to celebrate the rebuilding of one of the major churches of Hamburg, Germany, where C. P. E. Bach had been cantor and music director since 1768. It was fitting that a work originally produced for a church dedication in 1786 should have received its American premiere in a church completed in 1754 and not entirely unlike St. Michael's in its rather sober interpretation of the Corinthian order of architecture (although still lacking a tower).

Anyone familiar with the church cantatas of J. S. Bach would have recognized a family likeness in the

music, despite the half century and more separating this example from comparable works by the composer's father. But stylistically it is closer to music by Telemann, C. P. E. Bach's godfather and predecessor at Hamburg, and that of other composers who were popular in northern Germany at the time but whose works are hardly ever heard today (such as Gottfried August Homilius).

At least one movement from this Tower Festival Music had been heard previously in Boston. Like many of the composer's vocal compositions, it was assembled from previously written music, and its second half begins with the opening chorus from his *Dank-Hymne der Freundschaft* (Hymn of Thanks for Friendship). The latter was performed by the Handel and Haydn Society in 2001 at Symphony Hall under the direction of the late Christopher Hogwood. At least one of the three arias also comes from an earlier work, and another chorus, together with its introductory "ariette," is identical to the *Heilig* or German Sanctus which C. P. E. Bach wrote around 1778. He subsequently incorporated this popular *Heilig* into other compositions, much as Handel repurposed the "Hallelujah" chorus from *Messiah* for a number of occasions.

Those familiar with C. P. E. Bach's famously eccentric compositions for solo keyboard might have been surprised by the more classical character of the Tower Festival Music. In fact its song-like arias, as well as the simple choruses opening each half, are typical of the composer's late vocal works. Its pasted-together character is not obvious, as the pre-existing movements are joined together by newly composed recitatives. But the *Heilig*, scored for double chorus and orchestra and much more substantial than any other movement, is too big to be fitted comfortably into the end of the first half. This would not have been an issue in the original performance, where the music was broken up by a sermon read shortly after the *Heilig.* But in a modern concert presentation it does leave the second half of the work seeming anti-climactic.

The recitatives describe, among other things, the destruction of the original St. Michael's Church by fire after a lightning strike. These, as well as the borrowed aria (marked "Feurig," "fiery," in the score), provide some opportunities for dramatic singing and playing. On the whole, however, this was at best a conscientious performance. The *Heilig*, one of the composer's most famous vocal works, is remarkable for its slow opening section, in which one chorus represents the angels in heaven, another "the nations" on earth. The contrast was effective despite the absence of a second orchestra, the organ providing the main accompaniment for the angel choir. But the fugue that follows was less engaging, and although the composer went on record as wishing it to last no longer than three minutes, this rendition came in at three and a half—not too bad, but not exciting either.

Much the same, unfortunately, can be said for the rest of the afternoon's music as well. The chorus was well prepared, and mezzo Jennifer Webb injected some urgency into the little ariette that preceded the *Heilig.* Quinn Bernegger capably delivered the coloratura tenor solo in the "Deposuit" from J. S. Bach's Magnificat. But several other singers struggled, whether due to the tortuous melodic lines of the father or the chromatic modulations of the son. The orchestra failed to make a case for the use of modern instruments in either piece, playing politely where forceful articulation was required to give some energy to the Tower Festival Music. The trumpets, which were sometimes not quite in tune, tended to overwhelm the strings, although the violins deserve praise for managing C. P. E. Bach's unidiomatic passagework with aplomb, and bassoonist Stephanie Busby provided an expressive obbligato in one of his arias.

A Far Cry at the Gardner Museum (February 13, 2017)

Seriously Splendid Strings and Baritone
by David Schulenberg

The conductorless orchestra A Far Cry presented a distinctive program of twentieth-century music at the Gardner Museum's Calderwood Hall on Sunday afternoon. Joined by baritone Dashon Burton, they demonstrated that a concert that lacks famous composers and hackneyed repertory can not only be as satisfying as any but can even excite an audience, albeit a relatively sparse one that barely filled half the seats in the small venue, having braved a developing winter storm. Credit must go especially to cellist Michael Unterman who organized the eclectic program of mostly quite serious pieces. (Disclosure: Unterman was a pupil in two classroom courses that I taught at Juilliard several years ago.)

As Unterman noted on the group's blog (read it here together with the fine program notes by Kathryn J. Allwine Bacamot), the program's title "Misty" was meant to invoke "a kind of metaphorical fog of melancholy thoughts." Opening with Samuel Barber's "Dover Beach" for voice and strings, the program proceeded through four instrumental pieces, including Toru Takemitsu's "Dorian Horizon," ending with the "Serious Songs" (*Ernste Gesänge*) by Hanns Eisler. Unterman envisioned the program as "a miniature drama in two acts . . . beginning and ending in the mists . . . emerging from the first cloud drawing on Barber's youthful energy, then returning, drawing back towards Eisler's acceptance and wistfulness." As Unterman noted in spoken remarks on Sunday, the program's opening piece, by Barber, was writen while its composer was still a student; the concluding work was its author's last.

The great stylistic contrasts between the selections, which ranged from late- or neo-Romantic to experimental or "avant-garde," prevented this listener from hearing them as a coherent drama. But it was enough to be treated to a series of rarely heard pieces, all notable for one reason or another, and to experience up close the unselfish music-making of twenty-two superb musicians.

When I was a student, Barber was looked down upon by academic musicians (including myself), who belittled him as an unreconstructed musical conservative. But his "Dover Beach," composed in 1931, although taking no note of what Schoenberg or Stravinsky had been doing for the past two decades, is nevertheless an imaginative exploration of a harmonically complex late-Romantic idiom. Perhaps only a youthful composer would have had the audacity to set the famously evocative nineteenth-century poem by Malcolm Arnold. I'm not sure whether Barber quite captured the deeper resonances of the poem, which connects its Victorian author and his unnamed beloved with ancient Greek tragedy as they look out over the English Channel, memories of violence from the remote past still impinging on the present. But Burton's singing was gorgeous, rising (with the Cryers) to just the right level of real dramatic intensity for the climactic complaint of a world which "Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain." The epilogue that followed was beautifully shaped to end the piece quietly.

More deliberately backward-looking was the next piece, Dag Wirén's Serenade for Strings, Op. 11, even though it was composed a few years later. Again an early work, written in 1937, this is said to be the best-known composition by the Swedish neo-Classicist Wirén. It was not previously known to me, and I was glad to hear it. But I would not choose to do so again, as its four movements follow that derivative brand of neo-Classicism that borrowed eighteenth-century ideas without adding the imaginative elements that make Stravinsky's or even Poulenc's music from the same years so much more original. Only the third-movement scherzo seemed to me engaging, in a slightly jazzy, early-

Bernsteinish way, but for Wirén to simply repeat the opening passage after a contrasting middle section struck me as a failure of the imagination. To be sure, the piece was evidently meant to be light and whimsical. But the concluding march is appallingly devoid of the irony that one might have expected in a military-inspired composition written not far from Germany in the late 1930s.

The Cryers nevertheless executed it superbly, as they did the much more rousing "Orawa" by the Polish composer Wojciech Kilar. Best known for his music for films, including *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) and *Portrait of a Lady* (1996), Kilar, who was born in 1932, benefited from the relatively liberal attitude toward the arts in post-War Communist Poland. Like Penderecki and others of his generation, he initially adopted a so-called experimental approach, but he seems to have drawn back from that subsequently, as in this 1986 composition. Instead one hears some of the minimalism that by then had become quite fashionable, as in the use of short repeating figures especially familiar from the music of Philip Glass.

Unlike Glass, Kilar, at least in this piece, avoids the phase-shifting that can lend rhythmic interest even to simple repeating figuration. Indeed, I was surprised by how square much of this piece was, tending to fall into regular groups of four or eight notes. Occasional sudden disruptions of those patterns were synchronized flawlessly. But the piece is perhaps a little longer than its ideas warrant, and I would classify it as belonging to a type of contemporary-sounding crowd-pleaser that many former radicals had learned to write by the 1980s. Still, one could hardly fault members of the audience for cheering at the end, although I wish that the composer had not written an actual shout into the final chord—the lone vocal contribution by the players and therefore, I think, a gratuitous one, even if it did allow the Cryers to cry.

The second half opened with the one piece, apart from the Barber, that might be considered a twentieth-century classic, if hardly a new-Classic one. Takemitsu was most active as a composer for film and TV, and his later concert music incorporates instruments and ideas from his native Japan. Yet he is probably best known in the US for a handful of relatively early works that reflect the composer's interest at the beginning of his career in Western "avant-garde" writing. "The Dorian Horizon" of 1966 reflects that interest, avoiding anything that sounds identifiably Japanese. It also lacks any evident connection with the ideas of John Cage, with whom the composer had been associated. In fact it sounds more like the Polish "textural" music of the previous five or ten years.

Although its title refers to the Dorian mode of medieval Western chant, Takemitsu's piece supposedly inflects the notes of the Dorian scale in a manner inspired by modal jazz. I've never been able to hear anything modal in the piece, which seems instead to play with a repertory of mostly quiet, delicately nuanced chords and brief melodic gestures that more often than not are produced through so-called extended playing techniques: harmonics, glissandos, and bowing near the bridge (*sul ponticello*). The printed score is accompanied by a precise seating chart intended to insure the spatial differention onstage between one group of eight players, described as "Harmonic Pitches," and a nine-member set of "Echoes," among them three double basses. The Cryers followed this seating arrangement precisely, but Takemitsu also directed that the two groups be separated "as far as possible." The separation was minimal in the confined performance space of Calderwood Hall, which also places the audience around the performers, a configuration that Takemitsu cannot have anticipated.

As a result, half or more of the audience was actually seated behind the "Echoes"—and closer to them than to the "Harmonic Pitches" which the composer evidently envisioned as being placed at the front of the stage in a conventional theater. My own seat placed me in the equivalent of the front row, but the "Echoes" remained close enough that they could not produce what I imagine was the intended far-away

effect, which must be related in some way to the piece's title. Another problem that became especially noticeable in this piece was the hall's unforgiving dry acoustic. Despite the Cryers' very careful execution of Takemitsu's detailed score, and their sensitive attention to his precisely crafted sonorities (especially by the three basses among the "Echoes"), often the sounds just did not blend together as I think the composer envisioned them. I am sorry, too, that in this quiet piece the inevitable tiny noises of pages turning and the like, as well as the occasional louder coughing from the audience, could not help but distract from the intended contemplation of ethereal string sounds.

The last two works were more traditional, and although composed half a century apart had more than a little in common with one another. The Czech composer Josef Suk was pupil and son-in-law of Dvořák, and his "Meditation on the Old Czech Hymn 'Saint Wenceslas'" was the earliest piece on the program, dataing from 1914. It was, however, one of the last works of its composer, written in a post-Romantic tonal idiom not entirely unlike that of Vaughan Williams. Expertly written for string orchestra, the piece is indeed a drawn-out meditation that was lovingly shaped by the Cryers.

I confess, however, to being unmoved by either this densely soulful composition or the concluding song cycle by Hanns Eisler, another prolific central European figure whose music includes many film scores and stage works. A student of Schoenberg in Vienna after World War I, by the late 1920s Eisler had become a convert to a more conservative musical idiom, and to Communism, settling in East Germany in 1948 after he was expelled from the US for his political associations (having previously been exiled from Germany due to the Nazis). Completed in 1962, the year of his death, the Serious Songs are described as his last work, although the individual movements, which are performed without a break, go back to as early as 1936.

The title alludes to Brahms's Four Serious Songs of 1896, that composer's last vocal work. The poems, by Hölderlin, Leopardi, and others, are indeed overwhelmingly serious, bearing titles such as "Sadness" and "Despair" (nos. 2 and 3) but also "Twentieth [Communist] Party Congress" (no. 4). At times sounding like early atonal Schoenberg, the music at other times deliberately, and without any hint of irony, veers into a fully tonal style that would hardly be out of place in a composition by Mozart or Schubert, as for the final line of no. 1 ("O song, be my kindly refuge"). That the cycle as a whole ends with a neo-Romantic passage that sounds like something from around 1900 struck me as something of an evasion. Nor did I find either the vocal writing, which is often deliberately matter-of-fact, or that for the instruments particularly compelling. The brief "Despair" (song no. 3) was an exception, rising in its four lines to the one moment of real drama in the cycle and incorporating the only hint (in the violins' glissandos) that Eisler was aware of what Polish composers were writing just across the border at the time.

Perhaps greater familiarity with Eisler's music would make it easier to appreciate the rest of these songs. Certainly they were well performed, although for this portion of the program the ensemble shifted their seating orientation, which left my own seat almost directly above the singer. I imagine that his gestures were as expressive as his singing; the composer expected the singer to avoid conventional expression, but he was probably thinking of overwrought operatic performance, not the polished rhetoric with which Burton delivered these truly serious songs.

Virtuoso Entertainment from H & H Strings (February 11, 2017)

The Handel and Haydn Society Orchestra, in the form of a sixteen-strong contingent of stringed-instrument players, entertained a somewhat more-than-halfway-full Jordan Hall on Friday night. The program, titled "Glories of the Italian Baroque," will be repeated Sunday afternoon. Directed by concertmaster Aislinn Nosky, the concert also included solos by cellist Guy Fishman and five other bowed string players. Yet after Nosky the most prominent soloist, seated close to center stage, was guitarist and lutenist Simon Martyn-Ellis (more on that later).

Besides three concertos by Vivaldi, the program included four works by his younger contemporaries Durante, Locatelli, and Brescianello. Most familiar were two compositions that Bach later arranged for keyboard instruments, both from Vivaldi's opus 3 of 1711: R. 310 in G for violin and strings, and R. 580 for four violins, two violas, and continuo. (Individual works by Vivaldi are identified by "R" numbers from the catalog by the Danish musicologist Peter Ryom.) These, together with the cello concerto R. 403 in D major, received driving performances that brought enthusiastic applause and whoops from the audience but which tended to focus on the more superficial aspects of the music.

Potentially more interesting was the work entitled *La Pazzia* (Madness), one of nine *concerti a quartetto* written during the 1730s or 1740s by the Neapolitan composer Francesco Durante. Although bearing out its title with predictably unpredictable tempo fluctuations, the work may be most remarkable for its recurring solo passages for two violas. Their contributions represent an oasis of sanity amidst the rather generic eighteenth-century representations of craziness played by the violins. Violists Karina Schmitz and Max Mandel performed singingly, although on a technical point I must register a demurral about their consistently unturned cadential trills. And a little mannerism that might have been striking if the violins used it only once or twice—a slide that turned chromatic intervals into little sighs or shrieks—ran the risk of growing tiresome after having already been heard earlier on the program.

A chaconne attributed to the Stuttgart-based violinist Giuseppe Antonio Brescianello, which has been making the period-orchestra rounds, alternates between phrases reminiscent of Lully, the French seventeenth-century composer, and generic Vivaldian figuration. This latter was avoided by the somewhat more original violinist Pietro Locatelli, two of whose opus 7 concertos bookended the program. Both of these, designated as concerti grossi, include substantial solos for the principal first violin, yet neither is a fully fledged solo concerto. It was an unselfish gesture by Nosky to give these pieces such a prominent place on the program. It was also a stroke of imagination to conclude the evening with Locatelli's work known as *Il pianto d'Arianna* (Ariadne's Tears), which ends sadly and quietly, in the rare key of E-flat minor. This gave the otherwise in-your-face program a reflective denouement.

Yet Locatelli's Ariadne, left stranded on Naxos, is not that of either Monteverdi or Strauss. Wherever Locatelli's inspiration lay—surely not in the lost opera by Monteverdi, whose music was virtually unknown in the eighteenth century—he realized it in what again seemed to this listener rather generic late-Baroque terms. This piece received perhaps the most carefully thought-through (and most rehearsed?) performance on the program. Still, even Nosky's dramatic rendition of several quasi-recitatives could not shake the impression that in both concertos Locatelli was mainly imitating things heard in the operas of Hasse and other post-Vivaldian contemporaries.

Nosky's fellow violin soloists—Susanna Ogata, Christina Day Martinson, and Adriane Post—so matched her own virtuosity in the B-minor Vivaldi work that it is impossible to single any of them out.

Guy Fishman was equally spectacular in the quick movements of his concerto, though he, like the others, might consider that some pieces prove more impressive when played in such a manner that one can actually hear each of the flying notes. It is rare that a plucked instrument can be described as being too prominent a member of the basso continuo (the group of instruments that provides a partially improvised accompaniment in a Baroque ensemble work). But in this performance the theorbo, a large long-necked lute, actually overpowered the harpsichord, which was played very deferentially by Ian Watson.

This might not have mattered had the lutenist not consistently added the fussy type of figuration that forty or fifty years ago was considered mandatory in a keyboard continuo part. As a harpsichordist, I understand the impulse to play something expressive or imaginative on an instrument that is more seen than heard in concerts of this type. But for an accompanist to promote himself or herself to soloist by adding little licks that distract from or, worse, get in the way of the real soloists—as was the case toward the end of the "Ariadne" concerto—seems to me needlessly self-indulgent, in addition to being contrary to the common-sense advice of eighteenth-century writers on the subject. (Bach is supposed to have done it—but he was Bach.) Even worse, to these ears, was the guitar's infliction of flamenco-style syncopations and cross-rhythms on the Durante work and the B-minor Vivaldi concerto.

The Baroque guitar was a refined chamber instrument, and its orchestral use in this repertory is, as far as I am aware, undocumented, although it is common today. Because the pitches of the instrument cannot be readily heard above the bowed strings, in such a setting the guitar becomes effectively a percussion instrument. If one thinks this music needs a jazzy rhythm section, one might as well add a drum set. Audiences do love this sort of thing, at least the first few times they hear it. But to these ears the gratuitous additions coarsen the music, making it harder to pay attention to the things that attracted even Bach to these pieces.

My standard disclaimers apply: the excellent bass player Robert Nairn is a colleague of mine at The Juilliard School; one of the violin soloists, the very fine Adriane Post, studied there but never with me; and I've performed with two or three of the other players, one of whom has probably forgotten our collaboration in Bach's version of Vivaldi's B-minor concerto, on what we called the Forty Fingers Concert at Harvard's Dunster House in 1975, with the four solo keyboard parts played on harpsichord, virginal, chamber organ, and modern piano. I mention this last only to dispel any notion that this reviewer is a so-called purist when it comes to performance. H & H makes no claim to be "historically authentic," and I'm not criticizing it for not being what it doesn't pretend to be. But I would be disappointed if an urge merely to dazzle or to entertain were to prevail over creativity or expression.

The Boston Camerata's *Play of Daniel* (January 30, 2017)

The Camerata Revisits Daniel
David Schulenberg

As a second weekend of protests against the Trump regime filled Copley Square, the Boston Camerata returned on Sunday afternoon to Trinity Church to "revisit" the medieval liturgical drama known as *The Play of Daniel*. Henry Hobson Richardson's neo-Romanesque church was, as the program booklet suggested, a fitting site for this deliberately modern version of the early-thirteenth-century Latin work. It was also fitting, as director Anne Azéma noted in brief opening remarks, that the performance should have been taking place as a crowd (of mostly younger people) protested outside, their shouts and chants occasionally audible within. For the play, in her view, offers a warning to rulers of the "limits of their power," connecting the people of Beauvais *circa* 1200 with those of Boston in 2017, who are "still looking for" just and lawful government.

The program booklet for Sunday afternoon's performance announced the event as "Daniel: A Medieval Masterpiece Revisited." Whether the "revisitation" referred to the Camerata's revival of this production, first performed in fall 2014, or to the play itself, was unclear. But because this performance appears to have largely replicated the original one, including much the same cast and staging, I will forebear from offering a lengthy review. I did not see the original performance, but Brian Schuth's review (read it here) seems to convey its character very well. Besides sharing his admiration for tenor Jordan Weatherston Pitts as Daniel and bass Joel Frederiksen as Darius, I would add praise for tenor Jason McStoots's expressive singing and acting as the doomed Belshazzar. The Camerata proper was assisted by the Boston City Singers, students and alumni of the Longy School of Music of Bard

College, and the Trinity Choristers, some of them making up a very well trained and vivacious children's chorus.

Whether the original really was "a youthful celebration in music," as Azéma suggested, including dancing and playing of instruments, seems to me unknowable. This production, although incorporating some exuberant shouting and singing, even some unexpectedly sensual dance, pays more than lip service to the religious character of the original, framing the play itself within a "liturgy from Beauvais," that is, a prelude and postlude made up largely of several types of chants. (These, incidentally, did not include the *Te Deum* that the original play calls for at the end.)

This *Daniel* does more with less, jettisoning the fancifully costumed lion dancers and small orchestras of semi-medieval instruments that can be seen in other productions. Instead we have simple costumes and Peter Torpey's beautifully spare lighting. There is no stage; the action, such as it is, is ingeniously matched to the architecture of the church (and thus will need to be carefully worked out when the production travels next year). Among the many striking features of this production is its effective use of the splendid acoustic of Trinity. This allowed Camila Parias to be heard clearly and radiantly at the end, as an angel singing from the rear balcony (she was also an exquisite Queen to Belshazzar in the first half).

The cast enters silently, filing into the choir of the church, and throughout the "prelude" the music, most of it originally unharmonized chant, remains austere. But the selections grow increasingly elaborate, concluding with a brief bit of two-part Notre Dame organum (a type of harmonized chant). All this was beautifully sung; I was especially impressed by the soloists in the Gregorian alleluia *Justus ut palma* and the Parisian *Benedicamus Domino*, which were both given in a free but lively manner, without the dragging that can make this celebratory music sound like a dirge.

Azéma's version of the play itself relies heavily on the addition of instrumental music, which modern performers find indispensible in this repertory (you can read some discussion of that here). This element is limited, however, to a single string player (Shira Kammen, on vielle and harp) and one percussionist (Karim Nagi). Both employ the orientalizing approach that has long been in vogue among modern performers of medieval music, mixing with what now and then sounds almost like bluegrass inflections in some of the string playing. More often, however, the effect reminds me of neoclassic Stravinsky, as the improvised accompaniment adds a pandiatonic sheen of sound, with complicated cross-rhythms, to the original modal melodies. This was especially true, it seemed, during the elegant South-Asian- or Middle-Eastern-inspired dance of Indrany Datta-Barua, which unfortunately was not clearly visible from my vantage point (not every presenter reserves good seats for reviewers).

However anachronistic the dancing and instruments may be, the added music in this production was more disciplined, more unified in conception, than in others that I have heard. Not everything is accompanied by instruments, and an exquisite moment occurs when, for instance, Belshazzar or Daniel is left to sing a lament all alone. A particularly striking effect is created by having the men of the chorus hold out notes as a sort of drone to accompany Daniel's translation of the famous "writing on the wall" in florid plainsong. These inventions reveal real sonic creativity on the part of the director and performers, more meaningful to these ears than improvisations which tend to echo things heard elsewhere and sometimes distract attention away from the original melodies.

One problem which I don't think this production has solved is that of the text. (This issue received some attention when I reviewed another production; see the comments here). I noticed members of the audience trying to follow the synopsis in the program booklet. But no complete text and translation was

provided. It's a shame for the soloists to sing so clearly and expressively when most of the Latin is untranslated. Perhaps this is one reason instrumental accompaniments seem necessary; no one is following the words, and after one or two stanzas (the music tends to consist of short songs with multiple verses) most listeners need something else to sustain their interest. The main outline of the story is clear enough in this production, and supertitles would probably ruin the lighting design—nor is there any obvious place to project them within Trinity. But could it be that the absence of intelligible words is an essential element in this type of production, for all its originality and effectiveness? Would actually knowing what the characters are saying eliminate some of the mystery which for many listeners seems part of the appeal of medieval music?

Vivaldi's *Juditha* at Longy (January 22, 2017)

Judith Triumphs?
by David Schulenberg

On a day that saw a massive outpouring of resistance, led by women, to the newly installed regime in Washington, Pickman Hall at the Longy School in Cambridge was the site of a staged production Saturday night of Vivaldi's *Juditha triumphans* ("Judith Triumphant)." Billed as a collaboration between Eudaimonia, "a purposeful period band," and the Early Music Department of the Longy School of Music, the performance is the brainchild of harpsichordist Vivian Montgomery, who has long studied the work. The performance will be repeated this afternoon.

Based on the biblical Book of Judith—canonic for Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians, but regarded as apocryphal by Jews and most Protestants—the composer's sole surviving oratorio was written in 1716 for the women of the Venetian orphanage or *ospedale* in which he served as concertmaster. One of four Venetian charitable institutions then famous for their fundraising concerts, the Pietà, as it was known, still exists (its website is here). Today it is tempting to understand the story of Judith, who saved the Jews of Bethulia from soldiers of the Assyrian Empire, as a triumph of female genius and courage, and therefore as a parable for the women for whom the oratorio was written.

But much as we might like to see this work as a paean to female empowerment, its meaning within the patriarchal society for which it was first performed (like that of its biblical source) is at best ambiguous from a modern point of view. The residents of the Pietà were expected to take Judith—a favorite subject of Baroque painting as well as oratorio—as a model of piety, not agency. Their Venetian audience was invited to interpret the story as a patriotic allegory. As the poet Giacomo Cassetti explained in a poetic appendix to his libretto, "Judith is Adria," that is, Venice herself, then an independent city-state at war with the Ottoman Empire. Vivaldi's Judith can be staged today as a feminist icon, but in her own time she was a symbol for a city ruled by a male oligarchy. No actual woman of the time could hope to emulate this figment of male fantasy, least of all the minority of Venetian women who were citizens, a class whose female members actually enjoyed fewer legal rights than others. (This is one reason why Barbara Strozzi, a non-citizen, could become a major musical figure at Venice during the century preceding *Juditha.*)

The staging, including the lighting and rather unflattering costumes, was minimal although at times ingenious in adapting to the quite limited performance facilities. The Pickman stage was bare apart from a screen and a few tables and chairs. These, in currently fashionable opera-workshop style, were moved as necessary by members of the cast during musical interludes. The uncomfortably large orchestra occupied almost half the floor; the frequent substitution of one player for another on the two harpsichords and chamber organ led to some awkward visual distractions, at least from my viewpoint. The singers, who for some reason all had to perform barefoot, often entered via the narrow aisles. To represent the different locations of the Bethulians and the beseiging Assyrians, the former sang from the balcony.

This production, co-directed by Montgomery with violinist Julia McKenzie, was previously the subject of an informative news item by Virginia Newes (online here). I cannot agree with a characterization of Vivaldi's work as a "magnum opus." This appeared in a four-page essay by Montgomery, distributed to the audience along with the detailed program (for a longer version, see Montgomery's scholarly article shared on Google Drive). But the program booklet helpfully provided a full plot synopsis, complemented by generally accurate supertitle translations of the Latin text. A few lines were rendered

in such a way as to identify the villain Holofernes with the new US president; the first one or two instances of this brought knowing laughter from the audience.

In Vivaldi's day the musicians of the Pietà, several of whom were sufficiently notable to be named by the visiting German flutist-composer Quantz in his autobiography, played and sang out of sight of the audience. Vivaldi and his librettist Giacomo Cassetti naturally created the work bearing in mind this feature of the original performance, which spared the women from having to act out the dramatic events. Staging *Juditha* for a modern audience is therefore even more problematical than is the case with other Baroque oratorios (such as Handel's *Semele*) which were not originally conceived for a fully theatrical presentation. Less problematical is the fact that Vivaldi wrote the work for an all-female cast. Even the tenor and bass parts were originally for female voices (as in his many other works for the Pietà). Today we are accustomed to the use of high voices for the male roles in Baroque operas, whether sung by men or women. Therefore the only reservation one might have about the casting was the use of male voices for the lower choral parts and for the least important of the five solo roles. This, however, struck me as immaterial, at least by comparison with several more problematical aspects of this production.

Because this performance was by a mixed ensemble of professionals and students, it would be inappropriate to comment extensively on individual strengths and weaknesses among the musicians. Suffice it to say that in Saturday night's performance, mezzo-soprano Carrie Cheron was the most consistently convincing of the five soloists, in the relatively reserved part of the pious Judith. Among the players, cellist Morgan Little was impressive for his steady performance of the demanding basso continuo part. I was sorry, on the other hand, to hear a countertenor asked to take the role of the Jewish commander Ozias, which lies more comfortably for a female alto. In my view, moreover, singers should not be expected to sing added embellishments that incorporate such doubtful stylistic features as the tasteless modern practice of ending arias an octave too high. And although even professionals in this repertory sometimes use indeterminate pitch as a way of projecting strong emotion, I don't believe that this is something that vocal instructors or directors should encourage, particularly in repertory that depends on grace and eloquence even in highly charged "rage" arias.

"They follow a formula. That's what music of that time did." So I overheard one audience member explaining to another a notorious feature of Vivaldi's music. Unfortunately this performance did little to belie that stereotype. Vivaldi's oratorio has been popular ever since its modern premiere in 1941, one of the first major events in the twentieth-century Vivaldi revival. The music is especially noted for its instrumental writing, which was meant to display the *ospedale's* ability to present rare and exotic instruments, including a consort of "English viols" (probably a set of violas da gamba), chalumeau (an early form of clarinet), and mandolin. Even the organist gets a solo role in one aria, rising from the usual role of continuo player (accompanist).

But although sometimes charming and always more than competent, Vivaldi's music here does not strike me as emotionally compelling or even particularly inventive, certainly not by comparison with the composer's better-known instrumental music. The arias are less catchy than those of Vivaldi's German imitator Hasse (whom even Bach admired). And although it adequately fulfills the conventions of the time, I cannot agree with the director's assertion that the music delineates distinctive characters. Only the recitatives go beyond conventional harmony, and this unfortunately was marred by occasional wrong chords and faulty synchronization among the continuo keyboardists.

I must also point out that Vivaldi's music makes for a singularly inept drama, at least in a staged performance. Leading up to the climactic moment at which Judith beheads her enemy are no fewer than

five lengthy arias which, at least in this performance, were too slow to maintain tension. Even Holofernes' "Noli o cara," meant to represent the Assyrian commander's ardor for Judith, fell flat due to its unduly deliberate tempo. This let the air out of its remarkable instrumental accompaniment, scored for what should have been exhilarating solos for oboe and organ. I am sorry, too, that the need to cram an instrumental ensemble of two dozen players onto the floor and balcony of Pickman Hall doubtless contributed to an uncomfortably warm environment. This played havoc with tuning for at least one wind player.

Despite its many problems, I'm sure that working on this production has been an instructive experience for both the students and the professionals in it. It's impressive that Longy should be presenting it, and Eudaimonia's policy of asking audience members to pay what they wish is laudable (somewhat like the discretionary entrance fee at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art). But given the painfully inadequate resources available for staging such a work, it would have made sense to attempt something closer to the concert performance that Vivaldi had in mind. Hiding the performers from view might seem extreme, yet without trying it we can only guess at how effective that might be in a creative performance.

Even in this production the one all-too-brief moment of action took place (thankfully) behind the screen. When however, Judith, delivered the head of Holofernes in a basket (covered by a cloth) to her maid Abra, her reference to this "gift" understandably provoked titters from the audience. At the same time, the horror of the actual event cast a pall over the thoroughly conventional music of rejoicing with which Vivaldi ends the oratorio. I don't know, however, whether any different staging could eliminate all the cognitive dissonance that results from making visible what was meant only to be suggested by the poetry and music. I wonder, too, whether another approach to the production might have made it possible to focus more intently on a fine performance of the music, which after all should be the primary reason for paying attention to anything by Vivaldi.

Les Bostonades (January 22, 2017)

"History is happening this very second," observed violinist Sarah Darling, noting a "momentary disconnect" between the Boston Women's March, still in progress outside, and the concert of chamber music from eighteenth-century France which was about to take place inside Gordon Chapel of Old South Church. It was indeed a stark transition from Saturday's sunny, unseasonably warm day of mass protest to the dark, enclosed space in which Les Bostonades and an audience numbering in the dozens gathered for a performance of six little-known Baroque instrumental works.

This was nevertheless a splendid musical event by a group that has become a significant force in historical performance in the Boston area. The program of five sonatas and a chaconne focused on music of Jean-Marie Leclair, a younger contemporary of Couperin and Rameau who was not only the outstanding French violinist of his time but also a brilliant if now unjustly neglected composer. His music shared the program with works by his fellow violinist Jean-Pierre Guignon and the cellist Jean-Baptiste Barrière.

Two sonatas from Leclair's opus 9, a set of twelve such pieces published in 1743, were assuredly the superior compositions on the program. Especially impressive was the D-major violin sonata op. 9, no. 3, in which violinist Darling was joined by the continuo team of cellist Michael Unterman and harpsichordist Akiko Sato. In fact this piece is a duo, the cello almost an equal partner to the violin in the first three movements. Both string players were impressive, Darling playing as well as I have heard her, with pure intonation even in the difficult chords and double trills. It might be possible to play the first movement with more attention to Leclair's sense of humor. But I was struck by the violinist's attention to color as she gave contrasting shades to a series of echoing phrases. The concluding movement of the sonata, a *tambourin*, seems at first just a novelty, a not very promising realization of a popular but unsophisticated dance type also composed by Rameau. But as it proceeds it reveals the composer's considerable inventiveness—and in this performance that of the players as well, who shaped this potentially repetitious piece as a gradual, perfectly modulated build-up followed by an elegant falling away toward the end. I could almost hear the eponymous drum (the *tambour*) as the cellist made far more than one might have expected of a bass line that consists of little more than the same note repeated what seems like several hundred times.

Flutist Sarah Paysnick, a last-minute substitute for another member of the group who was unable to perform, was the more than capable soloist in Leclair's E-minor sonata, op. 9, no. 2. I particularly enjoyed the elegantly played variation of the concluding minuet. The four players joined together in the program's closing work, a grand Chaconne in G minor also by Leclair. This long piece is full of surprises, some of them taking it far from the now relatively familiar settings of this dance by Lully and other older French composers. The contrasts between sections were vivid in this performance, above all in the surprisingly quiet ending. This would have made for an unexpectedly contemplative conclusion to the program, had the players not added (unnecessarily, in my view) another, very chirpy, tambourin by Leclair as an encore.

Another violin sonata, Guignon's op. 1, no. 8 in A, had a few charming moments but did not strike me as coming close to Leclair in originality or effect. Perhaps this had something to do with its being alternatively for recorder. Also originally for recorder was a trio sonata in D minor by Barrière, notable above all for its unusual scoring, the second solo part being for cello. Here Paysnick offered the top part on flute, a plausible substitution. Still, I found the same composer's B-minor cello sonata much more engaging. Although published (in 1733) as his op. 1, no. 1, this was no debut work. Barrière chose as the initial piece in his first publication a grandly dark sonata that would demonstrate his

seriousness as a composer and capability as one of the first virtuoso cellists in France. This extraordinarily challenging music posed no evident difficulties for Unterman. Only the rather unimaginative last movement was something of a let-down, though this was no fault of the performers. Perhaps more purposeful dynamic shaping could give some meaning to the all-too-methodical passagework, which was nevertheless played assuredly as it ranged up into the cello's stratosphere, high on the top string.

Throughout the program, Sato provided a solid foundation on the harpsichord. Accompanying is an essential but unsung part of a concert such as this. Baroque composers left continuo parts to be filled out by the performer, who can be tempted to add counterpoint or other types of filler. Sometimes this worked, but I wonder whether one might, in some pieces, say more by doing less, as in the sarabande of Leclair's flute sonata. Is it possible that simply playing full chords could not only have brought out Leclair's expressive harmony, but also helped the flute incorporate the many small ornaments of the melody into the long-spanning lines that the composer seems to have envisioned?

Fretwork with Suzie LeBlanc (October 8, 2016)

Soprano and Viols Shimmer for BEMF
David Schulenberg

The shimmering sound of five viols filled First Church in Cambridge Friday night as the Boston Early Music Festival opened its twenty-seventh concert season, hosting the English viol consort Fretwork. Soprano Suzie LeBlanc joined them in just over half the program's nineteen selections, by four English composers of the late sixteenth through the late seventeenth centuries: William Byrd, John Dowland, Orlando Gibbons, and Henry Purcell.

In pre-concert remarks, bass viol player Richard Boothby traced the history of Fretwork, now in its thirtieth year. I had been eager to hear them, having long admired their recordings of music written for the instrument known alternatively as the viol or the viola da gamba. A sizable repertoire exists for combinations of two to seven such instruments, which differ from members of the violin family in the greater number of strings (six or seven) and the use of frets (hence the name "Fretwork"). In addition, all sizes, including the smallest or treble viol, are held upright in the lap or on the knees, rather than on the shoulder. Cultivated by wealthy amateurs in early modern England, the instrument was revived in the twentieth century, when it again became a favorite of amateurs.

Perhaps Boothby was right to complain that, before Fretwork was founded, viol playing was often at a "low level," with "painful" intonation and "flexible" coordination or ensemble. Yet Fretwork was preceded by fully professional groups, such as the Jay Consort of Viols and various ensembles directed by August Wenzinger (teacher of Jordi Savall). Still, it was exciting when, during the 1980s and 1990s, Fretwork released recordings of works by Byrd, Purcell, and their contemporaries that rendered this music in a way that was expressive and dramatic where it needed to be, always clear and thought-out—and with impeccable tuning and ensemble.

The group heard Friday night was not the one on those CDs. Of the five players present, Boothby was the only one who has been a member of the group since the beginning. These performances were technically close to perfect, but the verve and clarity that marked earlier recordings was not always evident. Suzie LeBlanc, whom local audiences know from her appearances in BEMF-sponsored operas, meshed perfectly with the viols, which is to say that her singing shared their good points as well as some less admirable features.

One problem was the almost uniformly serious, even solemn, character of the selections. The vocal numbers focused on death, mourning, and philosophical resignation. The instrumental selections were equally reserved, among them seven fantasias and related pieces of which all but one were in minor keys. All four composers wrote dances, but we heard only three by Dowland, all in minor keys and none of them really fast, let alone light-hearted. So dark and reserved a program might have been more successful had there been some variety in the approaches taken to these works by four generations of composers. But singer and players seem to have striven for the opposite, settling for an almost uniformly quiet manner that was, to be sure, appropriate for many of the selections. Of course viols are quiet instruments, or so we are told. But Fretwork's own recordings demonstrate how much can be done with timing, articulation, and varied types of attack, and a singer is free to do the same.

Byrd and Gibbons, whose music has much in common, occupied the first half of the program, Dowland and Purcell the second. The first of four consort songs by Byrd, "My mind to me a kingdom is," started the program auspiciously with its light rendering of a witty Elizabethan text. But here and in "Constant

Penelope," "Content is rich," and the elegy "O that most rare breast" in memory of Philip Sidney, as well as in Gibbons's famous "What is Our Life?," LeBlanc evidently strove more to blend with the viols than to project details of the vocal lines. Even in the first-row seat provided to a reviewer, I could not always hear the words, especially at the ends of phrases, which tended to drop off.

Occasionally this was expressive, as in the elegy. But even there the absence of clear accents left inaudible Byrd's rhythmic nuances, which reflect precisely those of the poem. Inasmuch as the program described the singer as "replacing" Emma Kirkby in the Consorte of Musick, it is not unfair to compare LeBlanc's interpretations with Kirkby's, who in her recording of Byrd's consort songs took a similarly minimalist approach to expression. Yet Kirkby nevertheless introduced subtle emphases on certain words and found ways to vary the intensity from stanza to stanza. Here this had to be done by having the viols pluck the accompaniment for one stanza of "My mind."

The pieces for instruments alone likewise suffered from indistinct articulation. From my listening point I could not hear the tune at all in Byrd's variations on "Browning." That was problematical in this early work, also known as "The Leaves Be Green." It dates from an early period, when the composer was obsessed with virtuoso counterpoint involving conflicting accents and meters—almost like the twentieth-century composer Elliott Carter, who acknowledged Byrd as a model. Without the audible clarity of the underlying tune, this performance seemed shapeless by comparison to Fretwork's 1995 recording, if pretty. The magnificent five-part settings of "In nomine" by Gibbons and Byrd were similarly hobbled, the built-in acceleration in each piece a pale reflection of what it could be. (The Byrd selection, incompletely identified in the program, was the fifth of the five-part In nomines.)

I was curious to see whether my impressions were due to the acoustic of the hall at my assigned seat. So for the second half of the program I moved to the balcony at the back of the church. There I was pleasantly surprised to hear singer and players at least as clearly as in the front row. But even the stunning modulations in Dowland's "Lachrimae tristes"—the fourth of the seven "Lachrimae" (tears) pavans—received no distinctive response from the players.

It might have seemed a good idea to use this piece to introduce Dowland's famous song "In darkness let me dwell." But the latter was, as Boothby admitted, "turned into a consort song." It therefore sounded just like the preceding long, slow piece in the same key. Moreover, distributing the lines of the original lute accompaniment among four viols makes explicit what the composer only meant to suggest. It also locks the singer into a somewhat stricter rhythm than otherwise. The very slow tempo taken for both numbers may seem appropriate, and the performers were impressive in maintaining a beautiful composure throughout; playing and especially singing in this manner is taxing and difficult. But I missed hearing the second of the song's two stanzas, which was omitted. And I wonder whether the references to "hellish jarring sounds" and other poetic images could not be interpreted more forcefully at a slightly less funereal tempo.

Some measure of liveliness returned in two galliards by Dowland, known as Essex's and Noel's—the latter in its little-known vocal version, "Shall I strive." But the high point of the program came in the concluding set with four of Purcell's fantasias in four parts. These astonishing, at times almost expressionistic, works—from a set of eighteen or nineteen pieces for as many as seven viols—received more nuanced performances than others on the program. Most touching was perhaps no. 6 in F, where perfectly timed pauses brought out the shattering transition to the minor mode at the beginning of the slow middle section. Also heard were nos. 12, 7, and 8, in that order, the second of these colored by Fretwork's unflinching execution of the many cross-relations (a type of dissonance favored by English composers). What might have been a disaster, a broken string on one of the bass viols, occurred in a

“timely” fashion, as Boothby observed wryly, at the very end of no. 12. This occasioned a little re-ordering of the remaining numbers on the program, which the performers took in stride.

To these ears, the arrangements of all three of the Purcell songs were even less convincing than the Dowland one. “Music for a while,” “O solitude,” and “The Evening Hymn” are all “grounds”: compositions built over short repeating bass lines. The arrangements were played perfectly well, but at times they left the bass line inaudible, while distracting attention away from the voice and toward Boothby’s added counterpoint for the treble viol. Seventeenth-century viol consorts may occasionally have substituted for lute or harpsichord in accompanying such songs. But, juxtaposed on the program against Purcell’s own striking harmony in the fantasias, these arrangements had a *faux* quality. For better or worse, these selections too were changed, anachronistically, into consort songs and performed with the same still beauty as the rest of the program.

BEMF was most considerate in printing the complete texts of the vocal selections in the program—including stanzas that were not in fact sung (in the strophic songs by Byrd and Dowland). On the other hand, I wonder whether we really needed three pages about the performers when little more than a page was devoted to the music. Boothby chose not to use his pre-concert talk to “expand on” his rather minimal program note, rather providing a talky history of the group, including the now-unavoidable call for donations.

Perhaps few in the rather sparse audience needed it, but surely some would have found it helpful to be reminded that an “In nomine” was based on a melody from a mass by John Taverner and that composers competed in making virtuoso settings of that melody; or that Purcell wrote three of the program’s four fantasias within the space of eight days, the fourth following a few weeks later during the summer of 1680. Particularly when a program is as abstract as this one, it can be alienating for a less experienced listener to be confronted by puzzling titles (and more-puzzling music) without explanation. Would it hurt audience retention to insist on more informative talking before the concert, especially if there is no space for proper notes in the program booklet?

***Saul* by H & H (May 4, 2016)**

A Splendid *Saul* from H & H
by David Schulenberg

The Handel and Haydn Society completed its Bicentennial Season with a splendid performance of Handel's oratorio *Saul* at Symphony Hall on Sunday afternoon. Harry Christophers led the Society's chorus and period orchestra, together with the Young Women's Chamber Choir and five principal soloists in a performance that was without a weak link or a dull moment. As David Burrows notes, in his biography of Handel, "so well matched in weight are these roles that a performance of *Saul* requires a cast as evenly competent as that for which Handel composed it." Evenly competent, or rather brilliant, indeed describes the soloists as well as the chorus and orchestra heard in Sunday's performance, which was a repeat of one heard Friday evening.

The oratorio, which was composed and first performed in 1738, was probably the composer's most sumptuously scored work to date, adding three trombones and several more exotic instruments to Handel's customary orchestra. Its three acts, moreover, require close to three hours in an uncut performance such as this one (a single intermission followed act 1). For these reasons the work is performed rarely, at least on this side of the Atlantic. Still, it is astonishing that these were the first complete performances of *Saul* in the Society's two centuries, and if any readers are aware of previous Boston performances, it would be good to hear from them.

In her pre-concert "conversation," Teresa Neff, the Society's Historically Informed Performance Fellow, described *Saul* as "absolutely amazing." Indeed it is, for both the story and the music are exceptional even within Handel's output. The libretto, by Charles Jennens, skillfully focuses on just a few dramatic moments in the Biblical narrative (from I Sam. 28–30). Unlike his libretto for the later oratorio *Messiah*, it comprises his own poetry, not a compilation of Bible extracts. For this reason I wish that the program book, which thankfully gave the complete text, had preserved the original line breaks for the recitatives. These employ the classic iambic pentameter verse of serious English drama.

I mention that trifling point because it is one of very few things that I could criticize about this presentation of the work. Christophers, who clearly knows *Saul* very well, directed it without pauses for applause between movements, assuring their dramatic continuity. The long sequences of celebratory choruses at beginning and end of some of Handel's oratorios can threaten to grow tedious. But there was no danger of that Sunday, as Christophers maintained dramatic tension to the end.

It is hard to say whether the chief role is that of Saul, king of the Israelites, or his successor David. Baritone Jonathan Best was regal in the title role, and countertenor Iestyn Davies was a superb David. Both parts require a full range of expression, from assuredness to despair. Best seemed to me particularly powerful in the sequence of recitatives leading up to Saul's attempt to murder his own son Jonathan at the end of act 2. Davies, as David, was lovely where called for in his opening aria ("O king, your favours"), fleet and clean in the coloratura of "Your words, O king."

The role of Jonathan is, on the whole, more lyrical and was sung quite beautifully by Robert Murray. He can be heard, together with the evening's two soprano soloists, on Christophers's recording of *Saul* with The Sixteen. Elizabeth Atherton was a very expressive Merab; Joélle Harvey was impressive as Michal, particularly for her touching final aria "In sweetest harmony." Four soloists stepped forward from the choir to perform minor roles; of Jonas Budris, Woodrow Bynum, Bradford Gleim, and Stefan Reed, the last was particularly notable for his dramatic portrayal of the Witch of Endor (a tenor part,

following an old Baroque theatrical tradition).

I was glad that, in the extended clapping that followed the concert, the chorus received a particularly enthusiastic surge of applause. They sang clearly and strongly throughout, always responsive to Christophers's sometimes quite nuanced direction. The latter was cause for one mild reservation; occasionally I sensed an excessively rhetorical shaping of certain choruses, as in the closing number of act 1, "Preserve him for the glory of thy name," which is a long fugue. Did the last four words ("and the heathen's shame") really need to be punched out in every statement of the subject to make their point?

Several novelties were no doubt as delightful Sunday afternoon as they were to Handel's original audience. A "carillon," actually a sort of glockenspiel, played by Justin Blackwell added color to several numbers, especially the chorus "Welcome, welcome mighty king." This was sung by the Young Women's Chamber Choir, who enchanted many in the audience by twirling ribbons as they marched in from the side doors of the house. I must admit, however, that I hardly heard them, as they were facing away from where I was seated on the floor.

I also overheard one of my neighbors in the audience complaining that he could not hear the theorbo. But in fact that lute-type instrument, expertly played by Paula Chateauneuf, was perfectly audible. You did, however, have to disentangle its sound from that of the harp, with which it was frequently and successfully paired. In fact the varying instrumentation of the continuo part was a particularly effective part of the performance (if one of uncertain historicity). Frances Kelly, playing a Baroque triple harp, not only was a sensitive accompanist but played with expressive rhythmic freedom in the embellished "Symphony" that follows David's aria "O Lord, whose mercies numberless." Ian Watson was, as always, a reliable harpsichord continuo player and also a nimble organ soloist in the overture.

The playing by the rest of the orchestra was as fine as I have heard them, with the violins particularly impressive for their seemingly effortless execution of many difficult ritornello themes. One might have thought it was January, however, from the incessant coughing and blowing of noses in my area of the audience. That, and the cellphone accompaniment of the otherwise *a cappella* conclusion of the "Mourn, Israel" chorus, marred an almost perfect musical afternoon.

William Christie and Les Arts Florissants (April 26, 2016)

Christie's Flourishing Arts Charm at Harvard
by David Schulenberg

The Boston Early Music Festival concluded its twenty-fifth concert season Sunday evening, bringing William Christie and Les Art Florissants to Harvard University's Sanders Theater in Cambridge for a program of "Serious Airs and Drinking Songs." That somewhat awkward phrase is a direct translation of a French expression that recurs in the titles of many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century song anthologies. Selections from that repertory became, in this performance, elements of a quasi-dramatic confection of the performers' devising. (Christie's interview last week with BMINT staff can be read here.)

Sanders Theater is primarily a lecture hall, not a performance space, but it was more than adequate for the "semi-staged" presentation of these French Baroque songs. A beautifully decorated French-style harpsichord by D. Jacques Way, flanked by seats and music stands for four additional instruments, served as the backdrop for the five singers, who entered and exited as called for by the music. As Harvard professor Kate van Orden explained in a pre-concert lecture, French seventeenth-century song is more restrained, less virtuosic, than the more familiar arias of Italian Baroque opera and cantata. Sunday's performance rendered these songs in a way that was sometimes charming, sometimes unabashedly theatrical, but never musically false to their original style.

Actually a substantial portion of the program comprised not French songs but two miniature pastoral dramas by Marc-Antoine Charpentier. These, however, were integrated into a program of songs by Charpentier and his fellow seventeenth-century composers Étienne Moulinié, Sébastian Le Camus, and especially Michel Lambert (father-in-law of Charpentier's rival Lully). Long a favorite of Christie, Charpentier is best known today for sacred music, but he was also a collaborator with the comic playwright Molière. Apart from Charpentier's "Petite pastorale" and "Pastoreleta," however, the program consisted of *airs de cour:* literally, court airs, but as likely to have been sung in private households as in royal palaces.

I was disappointed that the selections did not include any of the ornamented airs that comprise some of the high points of the repertory. The songs by Lambert were all chosen from the composer's second published collection of 1689. This contains part-songs for up to four singers, each introduced by a substantial *ritournelle* for two violins and continuo. Unheard were his earlier and more typical settings from 1669, in which the second stanza of most songs repeats the melody of the first with intricate and often difficult vocal ornamentation. It was a shame that none these songs could be fitted into the evening's quasi-dramatic design.

In Sunday's incarnation Les Arts Florissants consisted of five singers joined by five instrumentalists, including Christie, who directed from the harpsichord. The thorough program notes by Rick Jones informed us that this was the group's second program of this type, although evidently the first to be brought to Boston. Here the performers represented "a troupe of actors rehearsing, for the French court, a pastoral in Italian by the composer Marc-Antoine Charpentier." In other words, listeners were invited to join the musicians in the pretense that this was an actual seventeenth-century performance, albeit one given in present-day dress and with only a few props, chiefly a table and a clothes rack. These, following a regrettable modern tradition, were brought out by the singers during the overture to Charpentier's "Petite pastorale," which opened the program.

It has now become quite common to hear sequences of madrigals, arias, and other short vocal examples of "early" music worked more or less convincingly into artificial quasi-dramas. The practice has a quasi-model in the eighteenth-century pastiche or pasticcio, which had in turn a quasi-offspring in the nineteenth-century music hall entertainment that eventually became early twentieth-century vaudeville. Potentially entertaining, the practice also has the potential of descending into self-parody or vulgarity. This approach can demonstrate to a present-day audience the expressive depths of a simple lute song, as it did in Moulinié's "Enfin la beauté," the earliest work on the program (from 1624). But extraneous stage business can also distract attention away from music that was never meant to enact a story.

On the whole, the intrusion of modern stage conventions into the delivery of these songs did not compromise the superb singing and playing, except perhaps when, following another modern practice, mezzo-soprano Anna Reinhold was required to sing a portion of Camus's lovely "Laissez durer la nuit" while lying on the floor. She was allowed to finish it sitting up, yet I wonder whether the song's Monteverdian climax would have been even more intense had she been permitted to stand—as tenor Reinoud van Mechelen was able to do in the final refrain of Charpentier's "Tristes déserts," the very affecting song that opened the second half.

Something needs to be said, too, about the decision to have the three men sing Lambert's "Sans murmurer" while surrounding the mezzo's supine body. The gender politics of these songs are already potentially grating to a modern audience; here all were invited to exercise the "male gaze" which has been a concern of modern art history and cinema studies (and which, for once, is *not* obviously an element of this song). In any case, the "semi-staging" seemed to take precedence over the music of this song, especially as the voices by the end had grown so soft that they were lost (at least where I was sitting) into the loud ventilation noise of Sanders Theater.

That Reinhold is nevertheless an exquisite singer was made abundantly clear in two particularly beautiful songs toward the end of the program, Camus's "Laissez durer" and Lambert's "Laisse-moi soupirer." The latter opens with a quotation from John Dowland's famous "Lachrimae" pavan, a point which was underlined by having lutenist Thomas Dunford play the opening of the earlier Elizabethan piece as a sort of introduction. And for once in the program we were allowed to hear the *ritournelle* of Lambert's song played with legato suaveness by violinists Florence Malgloire and Sue-Ying Koang without any accompanying stage business.

The "high tenor" or *haute-contre* van Mechelen—in a role originally sung by the composer Charpentier—and baritone Cyril Auvity were equally exquisite as the competing singers in the opening "Petite pastorale." Soprano Emmanuelle de Negri, who was credited with the "semi-staging," also deserves praise, not only for her singing but for the restrained yet effective use of Baroque gesture and blocking, above all in the "Pastoraletta." Here bass singer Lisandro Abadie cut a particularly impressive figure through his expertly contorted gesticulations as the god Pan. I was less enthusiastic about the decision to turn Moulinié's part-song "Guillot est mon ami" into a sort of pantomimed debauche. The audience was amused, but did the little deaths alluded to in the text need to be made explicit by various sighs and gasps?

Christie's keyboard accompaniments were nearly always discrete, and the constantly varied continuo instrumentation rarely got out of hand, although I found the high harpsichord riffs and offstage birds whistling in Charpentier's "Charmantes fleurs" too cute. Gambist Myriam Rignol, an invariably attentive accompanist, had a few brief but expressive bass line solos in "Ah, que vous êtes heureux" by Camus, himself a player of the viola da gamba. But the point was somewhat obscured by the unnecessary addition of a lute line above it.

The largest work on the program was not a French song but Charpentier's Italian "Pastoraletta," an early composition in which the style of his Roman mentor Carissimi was much in evidence. Carissimi is known today for his sacred oratorios on biblical stories. The "Pastoraletta" is structured much like those, but although lighter in tone Charpentier's music occasionally achieves real drama, especially in a chorus that sees the theft of a favorite lamb by a wolf.

This is the work that we were to imagine being rehearsed by the performers, and its five scenes were therefore distributed around the program, interspersed with the French songs. This plan, reminiscent of BEMF's double performance of two eighteenth-century operas last season, was not ineffective. But it betrayed a lack of faith in the ability of the *air de cour* to hold a listener's attention throughout the evening, and it was ironic that each half of the otherwise French program ended with a scene from Charpentier's little Italian drama. The "wolf" chorus, which concluded the first half, was executed with real panache, no less so when it was repeated as an encore. I was puzzled, however, by the dirge-like rendition of the final chorus, contradicting the exhortations in its text to "dance, laugh, and faithfully sing." Did Charpentier really expect us to take so seriously the unoriginal closing line ("true love conquers all")?

Still, this was a remarkable program that could have been conceived only by one who knows this abstruse repertory as profoundly as Christie, and executed by performers who possess the exceptional capabilities of his collaborators. A final word of thanks must go to BEMF for the informative booklet, which included the complete texts of the songs together with Susannah Howe's precise translations (which were also projected above the stage).

“Collage Commemorates Carter” (March 16, 2016)

The new-music ensemble Collage, with soprano Tony Arnold, presented a program dedicated to the chamber music of Elliott Carter Sunday night at the Longy School’s Edward Pickman Hall in Cambridge. During a pre-concert panel discussion, poet and critic Lloyd Schwartz observed that Carter’s music is little performed these days in Boston. But it was only a few years ago that James Levine was leading Carter premieres at Symphony, and one can hope that the current hiatus in hearings of his larger compositions—which include a “Boston Concerto”—will be temporary, despite the difficulties they pose for performers and presenters as well as listeners.

Carter, who died in 2012 at the age of 103, continued to compose into his last year, producing an astonishing series of diverse works during his last decades, including his first and only opera. Sunday night’s program focused on music from two of the composer’s seven or eight decades of activity: 1942–52 and 1991–2001, that is, relatively early and relatively late. Absent were examples from the later fifties, sixties, and seventies, during which Carter wrote the large, immensely complex compositions for which he is best known, such as the Double Concerto for Harpsichord and Piano with Two Chamber Orchestras, or the Symphony of Three Orchestras—to name two pieces in which Carter’s signature idea of simultaneously juxtaposing distinct types of music, often played by distinct ensembles, is inherent in their very titles.

The works on Sunday’s program were more modest, at least in terms of scoring, but they included two of his more important chamber works, the Sonata for Flute, Oboe, Cello, and Harpsichord of 1952 and the song cycle *Tempo e tempi* for soprano and four players, from 1998–99. The most imposing and significant work on the program, however, was the Piano Sonata of 1945–46, which received a rousing performance by Christopher Oldfather. A numer of smaller compositions rounded out the program.

The music received performances at the high level that one expects from Collage. Director David Hoose actually conducted only *Tempo e tempi*, but he also led the pre-concert “conversation” with Schwartz and flutist-composer John Heiss, and he was an able page-turner for Oldfather. The latter joined soprano Arnold in the opening selection, the rarely heard song “Voyage” from 1943. Schwartz, noting Carter’s “devotion” to contemporary American poets, mentioned the composer’s “almost impeccable taste” in selecting his texts, which are often, however, as difficult and quirky as Carter’s music. The only American poem heard Sunday, however, was this one (“Voyages no. 3”) by Hart Crane, set in the neoclassic style of the composer’s early years. With some imagination, one can hear commonalities between this, or the program’s other really early piece (the Cello Elegy of 1939), and music written sixty or even seventy years later. But the differences remain stark, despite the composer’s unswerving attention to counterpoint (emphasized in Heiss’s remarks), or rather to a view of music as a sort of conversation between highly contrasting, even contradictory types of music. Each player (or singer) becomes a character in a metaphorical drama.

This approach had emerged clearly in Carter’s music by 1952, the year of the Harpsichord Quartet. This fifteen-minute piece used to be considered one of the composer’s first “mature” works, in which different instruments play simultaneously in distinct tempos or meters. Successive sections are related not by changes of key or tonality but by “metric modulations,” mathematically precise proportions between the speeds of consecutive passages. These metric modulations replaced traditional tonal modulations in shaping the music. Daunting on paper, the device produces a dialog of contrasting expressive characters, at least when realized by musicians as expert as those of Collage.Yet what once seemed a signature device of the composer now looks like just one of a long sequence of inventions that also included a relatively uncomplicated, more accessible style late in life. And although the

composer himself for a long time seemed to disavow his early tonal and neoclassic compositions, this program appeared to say that distinctions between those and later works are less crucial than they once seemed.

Still, the problems that Carter's approach created for performers and audiences more than half a century ago were not entirely absent from this performance of the Harpsichord Quartet. Perhaps because I spent a semester in graduate school learning to play it, I may have been hyper-sensitive to minuscule imprecisions of rhythm. Moreover, percussive sounds emanating from the instrument—or from audible foot tapping—were no reflection on the careful preparation of the harpsichord by tuner Beth Harris. Rather they must be ascribed to the common practice of assigning a pianist to play an instrument that demands a distinct sort of playing technique. While on the subject, I should add that it would be instructive to hear performances of this and other twentieth-century harpsichord music on instruments of the period, even if Carter himself assented to the use of the Baroque-style harpsichords that came into vogue by the 1960s. It may be that no live performance of this piece can capture the precise sonorities and the balance between harpsichord and the three other parts that the composer had in mind; still, the players did capture its humor and high spirits.

The first half closed with a set of mostly recent pieces for solo instruments. The high level of playing makes it hard to single out any one of the performances. Catherine French gave an intense reading of Rhapsodic Musings for violin, whereas Robert Annis displayed uncommon sweetness in the higher passages of Sweet Steps for bass clarinet, much of which lies in the uppermost range of the instrument. Figment VI for oboe, the most recent piece on the program (2011), received an eloquent performance of its almost tonal, almost neoclassic singing line from Peggy Pearson. This was juxtaposed effectively with the more purely neoclassic Cello Elegy of either 1939, 1942, or 1943 (depending on which source, or perhaps which version, one uses), played by Joel Moerschel together with Figment II from 2001. Longest and most monumental of these pieces—the adjective is not inappropriate, for although short and thinly scored these are not miniatures—was the 1991 *Scrivo in vento* for solo flute. The title is part of a line from a sonnet by Petrarch, "I write in the wind," reflected in some of the piece's wispier passages. Here Christopher Krueger emphasized the sharp contrasts at the outset of the piece between explosive high notes and a quiet lower line.

The same type of contrast, albeit within a much older style, occurs at the beginning of the Piano Sonata. Oldfather gave this an authoritative performance, making it the high point of the evening. The Piano Sonata is not an easy piece to like, requiring several hearings to appreciate both its originality and its profound expression. Superficially neoclassic and almost tonal, it shares some of its sound as well as it substance with the more challenging music of Stravinsky and Copland of the period: I thought especially of the Symphonies of Wind Instruments. Yet the piece's design—two lengthy, complex movements—is virtually unprecedented, and it was the first major instance of many compositions in Carter's output whose musical ideas grew out of the capabilities of the instrument itself: in this case the piano's ability to sustain chords in various ways (using both damper and sustaining pedals, for example) and to produce several types of harmonics and sympathetic vibrations.

These special effects, rarely employed by composers and requiring a sensitive ear and hand from the performer, were clearly audible, although I felt occasionally that a slightly less propulsive rendering might have given them a bit more time to sink in, to make their presence more tangible. A long fugue, which constitutes the central part of the second movement, seemed almost too long in this performance, its "American" syncopations and other neoclassicisms played perhaps a bit too emphatically. But the power of the piece shone through at the end as the echoes of the first movement (initially played quite crashingly) began to return, quietly. Oldfather captured the grandeur of this ending, which although soft

avoids the simple elegiasm of Copland in favor of something more challenging. The underspoken conclusion is, however, one reason why this piece will never be any more popular than another great two-movement piano sonata with a big fugal movement and a quiet ending (Beethoven's op. 111).

The eight-song cycle *Tempo e tempi* (Times and tempos) takes its name from that of the opening poem by the 20th-century Italian poet Eugenio Montale. But the title is also a play on Carter's lifelong obsession with time and rhythm. I wish that either the pre-concert "conversation" or the program booklet had explained this or some of the other devices employed in the music. For example, in the introduction to the opening song the oboe and clarinet play the same melody at different speeds and in different orientations, one of them inverted (played upside down). Even in an audience as familiar with new music as this one, I overheard listeners at intermission asking what, for example, it means to overblow on a wind instrument (a device used in "Steep Steps" and *Scrivo in vento*). Much as one may have enjoyed the anecdotes offered in the pre-concert "conversation," some of these were repeated from the program booklet, and it might have been more useful to present instead a clearer explanation, with examples, of some of Carter's signal ideas.

These songs nevertheless received a sublime reading from Tony Arnold. Carter's recitative-like approach to setting texts, avoiding repetitions of words or melodic ideas, requires not only accuracy of pitch and rhythm but close attention to diction and sonority if it is to be effective. This performance gave more than that. I was particularly impressed not only by the quietly beautiful rendition of the fourth song ("Una colomba," one of three brief epigrams by Giuseppe Ungaretti), but also by the carefully modulated climax of a second Montale song, "L'Arno a Rovezzano," for which director Hoose and his players also deserve compliments. One does not leave the hall humming the tunes of these songs. But Carter's continually inventive sounds stick in the mind, as do his underlying musical ideas. I hope we will continue to hear concerts like this, as well as performances of Carter's larger works.

“Mostly Machaut From the Orlando Consort” (February 13, 2016)

The First Church in Cambridge was the setting for a fine performance Friday night by the Orlando Consort. The British vocal quartet, which specializes in medieval and early Renaissance music, was presented by the Boston Early Music Festival. The audience, which left few seats empty, was remarkably enthusiastic for the program, which bore the title “Guillaume de Machaut (ca. 1300–1377): Portrait of a Genius.”

I say remarkably, for although the singing was exquisite and the program seemingly well conceived, this listener left vaguely dissatisfied, as if the promise of the evening had not quite been fulfilled. Perhaps the performers, who have given us some splendid recordings, were tired from their tour; several times, in spoken remarks, they mentioned traveling from a concert in Montreal the previous day. Maybe the bitterly cold, dry air was affecting them, as became apparent from time to time in the singing. In any case, I didn’t feel that we heard a good argument for how Machaut, who really was a genius, lived up to that term.

Machaut was not only the leading French poet of the late middle ages but the first musician in the Western world to leave behind a sizable corpus of signed compositions, sacred as well as secular. Going well beyond the traditional varieties of French and Latin song which he inherited from his predecessors, Machaut invented new approaches to the motet, ballade, and rondeau, the three most important genres that were represented on the program. Machaut must have understood his own singularity, for he saw to it that his works were gathered together into carefully organized, precisely notated manuscripts.

Machaut’s music, all vocal, is extraordinary not only in its melodic and rhythmic complexity but in harmony that is far richer than that of his contemporaries. His music is compelling but strange, not merely because of its unfamiliarity but as a result of his constantly pushing against the conventions of his time. Like Monteverdi’s, Bach’s, or Schoenberg’s music, it retains its strangeness even after repeated hearings, thanks to its originality, and it resists categorization despite the composer’s own systematic grouping of his works in the manuscripts.

Thus the two motets on the program, “Plange regni respublica” and “Se j’aim mon loial amy,” share the polytextuality traditional for this type of composition. But they are otherwise entirely unlike one another, in sound and structure as well as language and subject matter. This came across in Friday night’s performance, but only up to a point. Medieval motets are notoriously difficult to convey to modern audiences. No listener can possibly follow the two or three simultaneously sung texts. Yet it is not impossible for singers to project to an audience the regular recurrence of the so-called hocket passages in “Plange,” which articulate its four-fold isorhythmic structure. In this performance, however, the rapid alternations of short notes between the two hocketing upper voices sounded rather sleepy, and piece’s arcane design remained obscure. (The hockets were more evident, and entertaining, in a short, anonymous “In seculum” performed as an encore.)

The other motet, “Se j’aim,” had a distinctive sound, thanks to its numerous sharpened notes (an example of Machaut’s inventive harmony). Yet there was little variety over its two- or three-minute course, thanks in part to the repetitive nature of all three voice parts. Perhaps there is nothing a performer can do about this; to some degree it is built into the composition. Yet I wonder whether a more imaginative approach is possible. I wonder, too, how one is to take a composition whose texts express a wife’s complaint about being beaten by her husband, with music written and sung by and (one must suppose) for men. Medieval music uses a very different expressive language from that of

more recent times; are the strange harmonies and repeated musical gestures of this motet a compassionate reflection of the wife's complaint, or were they meant to be funny or even sarcastic, in a nasty way?

The remainder of the program comprised songs of various types. More approachable than the rather forbidding polytextual motets of the time, late-medieval French song consists of florid melodies for a soloist who may be accompanied by two or three additional parts. Among Machaut's simplest compositions of this type are lais and virelais for a single voice, represented on the program by finely sung solos by alto Matthew Venner and tenors Mark Dobell and Angus Smith. Ballades and rondeaux for two, three, and four voices filled out the program, with Venner and Dobell alternating on the leading (texted) lines while the others, including baritone Donald Greig, vocalized wordlessly on the accompanying parts.

Until a few decades ago, the lower parts of medieval songs and motets were usually performed on instruments. One of the attractions of early-music concerts was what amounted to the performers' orchestration of these compositions, using more or less fanciful recreations of instruments none of which actually survive intact from the period. The more austere purely vocal approach taken by the Orlandos was pioneered during the 1970s and 1980s by groups such as Gothic Voices. Naturally this places a greater onus on the singers, especially the one entrusted with the main or upper line. All four of the Orlando singers possesses the vocal dexterity and the stage presence necessary for bringing this off. Yet they perform impassively behind music stands, focusing on the notes, avoiding the more histrionic approach that Boston audiences first began to hear in the mid-1990s from Liber Unusualis. It is possible to go too far in that direction, yielding a type of drama or rhetoric foreign to Machaut's courtly late-medieval ethos. But I missed in Friday night's performance the imagination for vocal gesture and sonority that made the Orlandos' early recordings of Notre Dame organum and other medieval repertories so exciting.

The songs on the first half of the program were drawn entirely from Machaut's *Livre dou Voir Dit* (translated as "Book of the True Tale" in the succint program note by Machaut scholars Yolanda Plumley and Anne Stone). Here the songs were interspersed with spoken narration, successfully conveying the gist of Machaut's book, one of several from the period that alternate between sung and spoken poetry. This was an agreeable mode of presentation, yet nothing in the eight selections particularly stood out, unless it was a precisely sung chromatic passage near the end of "Se pour ce muir," which closed this half of the program.

Whereas the first half presented relatively late works from the *Voir Dit*, part 2 seemed organized only by the principle of variety. It included a relatively lively performance of "Ma fin est mon commencement," the famous palindromic rondeau, which I have heard elsewhere taken like a dirge. This part of the program also had the one non-Machaut composition, the anonymous *chace* or canon "Se je chant," but its whoops, hoots, and other imitations of hunting sounds lacked sufficient energy to elicit much of a response from the audience.

Scholars have worked out a rough chronological sequence of Machaut's compositions, and it is possible to trace the development of his style in each of the major genres. It would be pedantic to insist on performers' presenting the music in chronological order, or by type. Yet we would find it strange to hear a concert of Beethoven's concertos and symphonies in which individual movements from different works, composed at various times, were performed in a subjectively determined sequence. We tolerate this with songs, however, even when these were left by their composer in a particular arrangement. I wonder whether the songs and motets on this program would make more of an impression if grouped in

some way closer to the composer's. Would listeners hear more, would the changing style make more sense, would the poetry and music be more meaningful, if similar songs, or compositions written at roughly the same time, were grouped together?

The program was preceded by what was billed as a "pre-concert talk with the artists." This turned out to be a rambling conversation that centered on such musically irrelevant things as favorite performing venues and food eaten while on tour. Presenters have every reason for giving members of the public an opportunity to get to know performers as people. But this can be embarrassing when the people in question are not, for whatever reason, prepared to offer substantive informed commentary on the music they are about to perform. Nor is it the best use of a singer's voice to talk at length right before a performance. BEMF might consider following H & H and other presenters in offering more structured, more genuinely educational pre-concert talks by experts, of whom there are any number in the area. From the intelligent questions about the music posed to the performers by several members of the audience, it would seem that some listeners, at least, would appreciate that.

“Finely Finished Fragments by Blue Heron” (February 7, 2016)

Most lovers of choral music know, or know of, at least a few motets and mass movements by the sixteenth-century English composer William Byrd. Even high school choristers have sung madrigals by his younger contemporary Thomas Morley and other Elizabethan composers. But English music of the earlier sixteenth century, from the reigns of Kings Henry VII and Henry VIII, is unfamiliar not only to most singers and music lovers but to the great majority of professional performers and scholars. The reasons are several: there isn’t much of it, and what survives is complex and hard to perform. Many works are unusually lengthy for the period. The music lacks the obvious tunefulness and the familiar types of expressive gestures that characterize English compositions of the later Renaissance.

In addition, the composers are ghostly figures, each with just a handful of works attributed to him. For most, even basic biographical information is lacking. This makes it difficult to associate anything like a musical personality with individual compositions. The greatest problem, however, is that what does survive does so in fragments. Like ancient Greek poetry, the extant repertory is a tiny fraction of what once existed, and what we have often requires extensive reconstruction.

I’ve offered this preamble to make clear the accomplishment of Scott Metcalfe and the singers of Blue Heron in their decades-long endeavor to bring early Tudor music to concert and CD. Saturday night’s performance, to a packed house at First Church in Cambridge, included splendid presentations of four major sacred works by John Browne, John Mason, Hugh Aston, and Hugh Sturmy. Despite the intriguing name of the last of these, only Aston is likely to be familiar even to early-music enthusiasts. This is thanks to a single “Hornepype” for keyboard, plus a harpsichord piece by Byrd known as “Hugh Aston’s Ground” which may or may not have any actual connection with the older composer. In fact Browne and Aston seem to have been major figures in English church music of their times, representing separate generations active around 1500 and 1540, respectively. But their vocal music has rested unheard for centuries, most of it preserved only in two damaged sets of manuscripts.

Director Metcalfe discussed these and other aspects of the music in an informal pre-concert talk. Many more details were provided in the evening’s program booklet, which, as usual, contained a wealth of information about the music, its manner of performance, and the singers. In the past, Blue Heron has made their program booklets available on their website, but that doesn’t seem to have been the case with this one. That is a pity, as this seemed to me a particularly fascinating program, thanks to its inclusion not only of two generations of early Tudor church music, but of secular compositions belonging to the same periods.

Metcalfe made clear the royal connections of this music. Some of the secular songs were copied down in what is known as Henry VIII’s Book. The sacred items were heard in cathedrals and colleges whose virtuoso choral music was part of what Metcalfe described as a public display of royal patronage and piety. Eton College, whose famous choirbook preserves the earliest of these compositions (Browne’s “Salve regina”), was not an undergraduate institution in the modern sense. It is a grand late-medieval foundation of Henry VI, in whose magnificent gothic buildings a professional-caliber choir of monks was to ornament worship services attended by high-ranking members of the aristocracy. To be sure, poor boys also received instruction, and Metcalfe might have reminded listeners that Eton remains one of the most prestigious “public” schools in Britain. David Cameron is only the most recent prime minister to have attended it.

Thus Browne’s composition is of distinguished provenance. Thirteen minutes in duration, it is far longer than a typical motet by one of his better-known contemporaries on the Continent, such as

Josquin Des Prez. It is also distinct in style, clearly of the Renaissance in terms of its basic sonority of five vocal parts, but echoing older types of music in its ornate, unpredictable melodic lines. Certain features (mentioned in Metcalfe's program notes), such as the wide gaps between the highest and lowest voices, and the frequent reduction of the texture to just two or three voices for individual phrases of the text, are distinct to English music of the period. So too are the complicated cross-rhythms, which had been long abandoned by Continental composers. Unfortunately these were sometimes swallowed up by the acoustic of First Church, although I have no reason to doubt that the virtuosos of Blue Heron were executing them brilliantly.

I'm not sure I fully agree with Metcalfe's assertion of the "rhetorical efficiency" of this music (the phrase comes from the musicologist-composer Fabrice Fitch). Certainly these compositions are not rhetorical in the way of later music, or even of Josquin. There is, for example, hardly any text painting —the use of melodies or rhythms that suggest the meanings of the words sung to them. Exclamations such as the opening "Salve regina" (Hail, queen!) are set off by the use of the full choir, alternating with more discursive phrases for smaller groups of voices. Yet there are long passages in which Browne's free-flowing treble melody and intricate part-writing for the lower voices make it hard to hear any equally distinctive musical rhetoric. Despite the wonderfully modulated singing, it was sometimes difficult to follow the Latin words.

That would not have been considered a problem by the first singers or audiences of this music, which predates the famous "reforms" that made it mandatory for composers to present sacred texts in a way that made them readily audible. Even the later pieces by Mason, Sturmy, and Aston, written during what Metcalfe described as the "chaotic" period of the English Reformation, retain an early-Renaissance style. Nevertheless, Aston's "Ave Maria ancilla trinitatis," which closed the program, conveyed the tranquillity and timelessness that Metcalfe mentioned in his remarks. One was hardly conscious of the piece's extraordinary fifteen-minute duration. Although it came at the end of a long program, Blue Heron realized perfectly the dramatically surging ascents of its final Amen.

Equally extraordinary was Mason's "Vae nobis miseris," composed for five low vocal parts and performed Saturday by Blue Heron's ten male singers. The remarkable sonorities of this piece could emerge only with the perfect intonation of this ensemble, which was led ably by tenor Jason McStoots while conductor Metcalfe sat to the side.

I was only slightly less enthralled by the secular songs. Several of these, which took the form of rounds or canons, may well have been "a gas to sing," as Metcalfe put it. But these might have been presented with a little more energy and a little less emphasis on their doleful or purely lyrical aspect. That said, the obscure composers Daggere, Cooper, and Kempe were certainly cultivating a late-medieval sort of sadness that had gone out of fashion on the Continent by the early 1500s. And there were some very affecting moments in William Cornysh's "Adew mes amours," the sole French-texted work on the program. Sung by soprano Shari Alise Wilson and three other soloists, its concluding line achieved almost madrigalian intensity, surprising in a work of this early date. I was also impressed by Margot Rood's very sweet singing in the anonymous "Madame d'amours" (English despite its opening line). A trio headed by countertenor Martin Near sang expressively in "Alas it is I" by Edmund Turges or Sturges. The program notes informed us that this work is sometimes thought to be by Robert Fayrfax. But the latter's "That was my woo," also on the program, struck me as more turgid and rambling, despite being well sung.

Before concluding I must express just the slightest reservation about one aspect of the program. The music by Mason, Sturmy, and Aston is preserved only in the Peterhouse Partbooks. This is a set of

manuscripts now housed at Peterhouse College in Cambridge (England), although originally written in 1540 for Canterbury Cathedral. Once five in number, these now comprise just three books and fragments of a fourth. The book containing the tenor part is lost, as is a portion of the soprano book. Blue Heron's long-term project to perform and record this music rests on the work of the English musicologist Nick Sandon, who has devoted his career to reconstructing the missing music.

Metcalfe praised Sandon as a brilliant "partner" of composers whose music would otherwise remain silent. Nevertheless, some of what we heard Saturday night was actually Sandon's music, especially in Aston's piece, where two of the vocal parts are his, including the prominent soprano. Only occasionally, especially within Mason's work, did I wonder about the style of what I was hearing. There, I suspect that the repetitive character of the music was a result of the many close echoes between voices moving in the same range—a feature of the original which one might or might not consider a weakness, but in any case not something entirely due to Sandon's reconstruction. Still, as in the opening of Aeschylus's play *The Libation Bearers*, or whole poems by Sappho, what we have is in part the creation of an editor.

Restoration is necessary if we are to hear (or read) these things. But with ancient Greek poetry we have the benefit of centuries of scholarship, generations of editors building on one another's work. For Tudor music, Sandon and Blue Heron are pioneers. Although I've carried out my own musical restorations for compositions by Bach and Handel, I am hardly in a position to evaluate Sandon's work within this much more recondite repertory. If an ear as fine and as attuned to this music as Metcalfe's is satisfied with it, I can hardly say more. Still, I wonder whether Sandon's involvement in the music should not have been noted a little more prominently in the printed program, if only in the interest of sheer accuracy.

Sandon himself is appropriately modest about his contribution. He writes (in a note to Blue Heron's first CD): "I would not claim that my restorations are definitive, but I hope that they may help to gain for this music some of the attention that it deserves." The beautiful and moving results achieved by Blue Heron prove that he has succeeded at more than that.

Seraphim Singers, 20th-century choral music (January 25, 2016)

Somber Seraphim
David Schulenberg

The Seraphim Singers, resident ensemble at Boston's Mission Church (more properly the Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Hope), traveled to Cambridge Sunday afternoon to offer "All Flesh is Grass: Reflections on Death and Eternity" at First Church, Congregational. The rather somber program of unaccompanied choral music, some 75 minutes in length without an intermission, nevertheless had its moments of compelling expression and engaging sonority. It will be repeated next Sunday at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Brookline. Jennifer Lester directed three rarely heard twentieth-century choral works by Hugo Distler, Ildebrando Pizzetti, and Edwin Fissinger. Flutist Timothy Macri collaborated in the first work and also offered a solo.

I was interested especially in the music by Distler, an important figure in German music of the 1930s who remains little known in this country, except to organists and lovers of early twentieth-century choral music. Although Distler, like many Germans of his generation, joined the Nazi party for career reasons, he soon found his music and religious convictions antithetical to the party, and he seems to have engaged in a sort of passive resistance. As the war intensified and professional and personal life deteriorated, he committed suicide in 1942.

Sunday's program opened with Distler's *Totentanz*, op. 12, no. 2. Essentially a series of fourteen short a capella motets, the 1934 work was presented in the format devised by the composer for an early performance. There Distler's little motets alternated with readings of a poetic dialog between Death and twelve members of society, who range from an emperor and a bishop down to an old man and a little child. The dialog, by Distler's contemporary Johannes Klöcking, reflects on the texts by the seventeenth-century poet Angelus Silesius which Distler set to music. Also interspersed with the choral motets were variations for solo flute on a folk song known as "Der Schnitter": Death as the grim reaper.

As interesting as this may seem on paper, it was less so in the event. Distler wrote in a neo-Baroque idiom which is heavily indebted to the seventeenth-century composer Heinrich Schütz. Although original and varied, his treatment of Silesius's epigrammatic "Sprüche" (sayings) is on a small scale, some of the individual motets less than a minute long. Hence in this performance the speaking took up more time than the singing. Twelve readers in the dialog, who emerged from the audience to play the roles of nobleman, soldier, and so forth, did their best to render their lines gracefully, sometimes even with a little characterization. But the uncredited translation lacked the poetry of the original and came across a little too much like lay readings during a church service. Macri gave a forceful delivery of the lines assigned to Death, but his flute solos might have had more energy, at least if I am right that they were meant to represent an ironic dance of death.

That said, the ten minutes or so of music were well done. I was particularly impressed by the quiet close of the last of the motets, and, in general it was the slower ones, such as those addressed to the sailor and the hermit, that were cleaner and clearer. Sharp contrasts between sustained and animated singing within no. 5 (to the doctor) were also effective and dramatic, however, even if the lower voices were not always as precise in pitch or as focused in sound as the sopranos.

I appreciate the reasons for calling on representatives of the public to join in the dance of death. But I wonder whether performances of this work would not be more effective if the readings were done less deliberately, by a single trained actor. I was equally unsure of the effectiveness of the little interlude for

solo flute that followed. This was identified in the program only as “Komm, süsser Tod, arr. Timothy Macri”; I think it consisted of variations on the little song for voice and continuo by J. S. Bach which is listed as BWV 478. The sound of the unaccompanied flute was evocative in a general way, but without words the song (“Come, sweet death”) could not have meant much to most listeners. The languid style of the arrangement, which might be described as quasi-Baroque, did not strike me as compelling in any particular way.

The most substantial work on the program was Pizzetti’s *Messa di requiem.* Although Pizzetti was a generation older than Distler, this was an earlier composition (1922), not only chronologically but in its more thoroughly retrospective style. The composer, whose music I had not previously known, was famed during his lifetime for his operas. An outspoken critic of the musical developments which were then taking place in Vienna and elsewhere, here he wrote in an idiom that mingles echoes of Palestrina with bits of Verdi and even Respighi.

The music is expertly written for choir, however much it is a pastiche stylistically. At several points in the Dies irae—the long, vivid sequence that forms the musical centerpiece of any Requiem—the Seraphim rose to a level of intensity not achieved elsewhere in the program, then fell to a nicely modulated Amen at the end. Clearly a demanding piece, it seemed to give the singers little trouble, revealing only the slightest hints of fatigue in a few quiet passages toward the end, which nevertheless came across perfectly.

The concert ended with a brief “Lux aeterna” by Edwin Fissinger. The composer, who was a long-time choral director at the University of North Dakota, clearly understood how to write for mixed voices in a mildly challenging contemporary idiom. The pan-diatonic writing, although already a cliché when the piece was composed in 1982, is an effective way of setting the text (“Eternal light”)—the concluding part of a standard Requiem, which Pizzetti chose not to include in his setting. Soprano Rachael Luther made a lovely soprano solo of the repeated “requiescant in pace” (let them rest in peace) just before the end.

Antico Moderno ensemble, new and 17th-century music (January 23, 2016)

Modish Antics from Antico Moderno
David Schulenberg

New music mixed with old in Friday evening's concert by the period-instrument ensemble Antico Moderno at First Lutheran Church in Boston, where they are ensemble-in-residence. The ensemble, led by founder Bálint Karosi at the harpsichord, offered an intriguing hour-long program, alternating between seventeenth-century Italian chamber sonatas and contemporary works for the same combination of old instruments. The group, which in this incarnation also included Heloise Degrugillier (recorders), Edson Scheid (violin), and Jacques Lee Wood (cello), will repeat the program Sunday afternoon in the Norway Pond series at Hancock, New Hampshire. The Hungarian-born Karosi, until recently organist at First Lutheran, is now cantor at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Manhattan.

The program's title, "Stylus Phantasticus," more properly refers to the improvisatory music of German Baroque composers such as Buxtehude for organ and other keyboard instruments. But it was apt for the somewhat earlier selections by five Italian composers which, although little-known in mainstream musical circles, have long been standards in the historical-performance world. None of this music was actually composed for precisely the combination of instruments heard Friday night. But the two new works on the program were written specifically for the group, which in its short history has made a practice of commissioning compositions for "old instruments."

Modern composers have long been fascinated by the sounds of historical instruments. But many such works are in tired neo-Classical (or neo-Baroque) styles, or they combine one or two early instruments, such as the harpsichord, with modern ones, as in Elliott Carter's Sonata for harpsichord, flute, oboe, and cello. The sound and playing technique of Baroque winds and strings also differ substantially from those of present-day instruments, however. The "moderno" portion of Antico Moderno's programming takes advantage of sonorities which can be produced only by the gut strings and other "antico" features of historical instruments.

If I had one negative critique of Friday's concert, it is that it was too short: it comprised barely sixty minutes of music, and few of the individual compositions were quite long enough to stand on their own. Several of the early-Baroque pieces, originally intended to serve as preludes or interludes during religious services, might have seemed more substantial grouped into pairs. And the wonderfully imagined sonorities were just getting interesting when Eun Young Lee's "Gil," one of the two newly commissioned works, reached its understated conclusion.

The playing was nevertheless superb. I was worried to find the players still rehearsing when I entered the hall a few minutes before the scheduled starting time. But the performances were assured and the ensemble playing flawless, even in the frequent changes of tempo and tricky transitions of the early-Baroque pieces.

The program opened with Sonata 8 by Giovanni Battista Fontana, from a posthumously published 1641 collection, and Sonata 10 from the second of two sets first issued during the 1620s by Dario Castello. Both pieces are typical of the time in consisting of numerous short, contrasting sections. But Fontana's was originally for two violins and continuo, Castello's for two unspecified treble instruments and continuo plus "bassoon or viola."

I don't think there was any loss in assigning one of the upper parts of both pieces to recorder, especially

given Degrugillier's seemingly effortless virtuosity. Nor could anyone take serious issue with Wood's equally fluent performance on cello, instead of some precursor instrument, or with the use of a small but bright-sounding Italian harpsichord to provide continuo, in place of the organ that probably accompanied most early performances. But I would have liked to hear a bit more contrast between the two pieces, which differ not only in their intended scoring but in personality. Fontana tends to maintain a certain gravity and breadth of phrasing despite his florid early-Baroque melodic writing. Castello, on the other hand, is prone to sudden, surprising changes of speed and character, dramatically juxtaposing sharply contrasting ideas. That said, this was at once as dashing and as polished a performance I have heard of either piece, although perhaps not every quick section needed to start fast and then get even faster.

The first of the new commissioned pieces, William Cooper's "Sonata a quattro" (Sonata for four, a common Italian Baroque title) was conducted by the composer. He clearly understands the instruments, being director of the Early Music Ensemble at the University of California at Davis, where he is also a doctoral student in composition. In prefatory remarks he described this work of roughly ten minutes as a confrontation of two styles, one "more contemporary" than the other; these do "battle" and then "reconcile" at the end. I wasn't sure I heard the reconciliation. But the contrasts were clear enough, although I sensed a neo-Classic element throughout, even in sections that featured fluttertonguing (rapidly repeated notes) from the recorder, alongside other new-ish techniques. The less "contemporary" passages occasionally suggested the mid-twentieth-century modernist counterpoint of American composers such as Walter Piston and Aaron Copland. But these were never derivative, and they alternated unpredictably yet gracefully with the more motoric contrasting passages.

At the center of the program were two solos. Biagio Marini's Sonata "per sonar con due corde" is from his path-breaking Opus 8 of 1629, the first collection to contain significant music for solo violin. Accompanied only by ever-inventive Karosi at the harpsichord, here the Brazilian-born Scheid demonstrated why he is both musically and technically one of the most assured and accomplished of today's younger period violinists. Potentially a chaotic jumble of contrasting snippets, Marini's sonata came across in this performance as an eloquent monologue, comparable in effect to one of the composer's monodies for solo voice. Only one short passage is actually "to be played on two strings," that is, as a series of chords. This section was suitably lively and dance-like, but more moving were several quiet, vocally conceived passages. (Disclosure: Scheid was a student in the class in historical performance that I teach at Juilliard.)

An "improvised Fantasia and Ciaccone on the electro-acoustic clavichord" followed. Here Karosi played alone on a recently acquired instrument built by the Montreal-born maker and player Renée Geoffrion. The clavichord, originally a very quiet stringed keyboard instrument of the Renaisssance and Baroque, is here enhanced by an electric-guitar-type pickup. The device did not impress me with its somewhat jangly but otherwise unmodulated sound. Nor did Karosi's improvisation sound like one, but that is hardly a negative criticism. For the poise and the clear, skillful harmony with which he played might as well have been those of a written composition—even if the style tended to migrate from seventeenth-century Italy to something closer to early eighteenth-century France or Germany.

For me the outstanding discovery of the evening was Lee's "Gil," for the full ensemble and again conducted by Wood. As explained by the composer, who teaches at Boston Conservatory, the title is a Korean word meaning "road" or "path," with the same metaphoric implications as its English equivalents. In this work I was struck by the imaginative use of the ensemble's distinctive sonorities, which included both harpsichord and amplified clavichord. In one passage that combined quiet violin and cello harmonics, Degrugillier's tenor Renaissance recorder sounded almost like a shakuhachi, the

Japanese smoked-bamboo flute. But the composer told me afterwards that she hadn’t originally intended the piece to recall Asian instruments. All the same, the utterly contemporary writing for these five mostly historical instruments led me hoping to hear more than what the piece’s five minutes or so could make of them.

The program ended with an expressive performance of Giovanni Paolo Cima’s “Sonata a tre” (the very first trio sonata) and Antonio Bertali’s Ciaccona for violin and continuo. The latter was heard in an arrangement that had the recorder alternating with violin on the top part, with pizzicato cello joining the harpsichord on the continuo line. I was probably the only member of the audience who did not find this delightful, but no one could complain that it lacked precision or panache.

Paul O’Dette and Ron McFarlane, lute duo (January 17, 2016)

Two Lutes for the Price of One
David Schulenberg

Solo recitals by pianists and other keyboard players were once regular features of concert series in Boston. Lute recitals were always rare, since players (lutenists) are rare, but a classical guitarist could pack a hall. I recall seeing Andrés Segovia at Symphony—and hearing him perfectly from a spot in the second balcony that was about as far as possible from his seat on stage. Solo recitals seem less common now than several decades ago, but Saturday night the Boston Early Music Festival brought two lutenists to First Church in Cambridge for the price of one.

First Church lacks Symphony Hall’s famous acoustics, so I was surprised to discover how clearly I could hear the lute duo of Paul O’Dette and Ronn McFarlane from the back of the packed room at the end of their program. This was the second duo-recital of the current season to feature the lute, following soprano Emma Kirkby’s concert with lutenist Jakob Lindberg last October. As on that occasion, the performers offered an intelligently crafted selection of fascinating pieces, performed exquisitely by two of the world’s finest masters of their respective repertories.

“Virtuoso Duets from Italy and England” was the evening’s title. As the two players explained during a pre-concert talk, the duet was the normal performance medium for the lute during its first centuries in Europe, in the late middle ages and early Renaissance. Then a master would typically be accompanied by an apprentice playing a simpler part, at a time when the lute, which we think of today as a chordal instrument like the guitar, was confined to single-note lines (and played with a pick).

The pieces on Saturday’s program were later in origin and performance style, chiefly from the years just before 1600, and most had challenging polyphonic parts for both players. But several selections echoed the older tradition, and throughout the evening the two players alternated between “master” and accompanist roles, sometimes within, sometimes between individual pieces. These numbered twenty-six, evenly divided between the two halves of the program. If the individual selections were mostly short, the concert as a whole was serious and substantial, though not without its lighter moments.

Part 1 comprised music from Italy, more specifically Milan, Florence, and Venice in the north. Part 2 focused on Elizabethan England. Included on both halves were pieces that the two players described as high points of the repertory: the “spectacular” Toccata for Two Lutes by Alessandro Piccinini, and the Passing Measures (or Passamezzo) Galliard by John Danyel, designated as the “masterpiece” of English “treble-ground” writing for virtuoso and accompanist. (Two years ago I heard a performance of Piccinini’s toccata on lute and harp by Olav Chris Henriksen and Barbara Poeschl-Edrich, reviewed here.)

For this listener the high point of each half was nevertheless the lone solo piece: a Passacaglia by Piccinini and John Dowland’s Fantasia no. 7. McFarlane’s rendition of the Passacaglia—an early-Baroque “ground” related to Monteverdi’s famous Lament of the Nymph—struck me at first as slightly more driven than it needed to be. But the playing was masterful, and it became expressive in time for a passage near the end in which a chromatic melody was deftly combined with a running bass. O’Dette gave a splended performance of the Dowland piece, perhaps the most challenging of the composer’s fantasias. It presents an extraordinary range of textures and rhythms and was executed as close to perfection as I can imagine.

The duets reached those peaks only occasionally, though this was no fault of the performers. Rarely do these pieces aim for the contrapuntal depth of choral or keyboard music of the period, or of Francesco and Dowland in their pieces for solo lute. This music tends to focus instead on florid embellishment, which, although potentially expressive and frequently a vehicle of virtuosity, can become a mere sheen of sound if two overlapping melodic lines have to compete for the listener's attention, as they often do in this repertory. To be sure, the sound of two lutes, resembling that of two harps heard quietly in the distance, can be quite ravishing, especially when played as beautifully as they were on this occasion.

Yet even from the fifth-row seat where I spent most of the evening, the interplay between the two performers, using closely matched copies of late-Renaissance instruments, could be hard to follow. In comments that preceded the second half, O'Dette won applause for a remark about the preference for "conversational" over loud music during the Renaissance. Yet I was not always convinced that the addition of a second part, or perhaps of improvised decoration in some pieces, was an improvement.

This seemed particularly so in three solo fantasias by Francesco da Milano, the first great exponent of the lute whose music survives in quantity. Originally contemporary with the choral polyphony of Clemens and Gombert, the complex textures of these pieces were not made clearer by the addition of second lute parts after 1550 by the Flemish composer Ioanne Matelart. Likewise, Giovanni Antonio Terzi's arrangements of two canzoni by Claudio Merulo were *tours de force* of late-Renaissance embellishment, but though brilliantly played they failed to move me.

Even the original duets from Italy, including three composed or arranged by Vincenzo Galilei (father of the astronomer), were less than entirely persuasive. Perhaps these and other pieces on the first half needed a more rhetorical approach, with greater clarity and more time taken between phrases and sections, to make their points in the space of First Church. On the second half of the program, the composers' use of singing or dance-like melodies and more distinctly articulated formal designs made the English selections easier to follow.

These English pieces were certainly more familiar. A number of them were reworkings for two lutes of popular songs and dances of the time. I was surprised that neither the otherwise informative program notes nor the pre-concert talk explained the anonymous arrangement of Richard Allison's "De la tromba" pavane, an entertaining if war-like dance marked in this version by echoing fanfares between the two lutes. Another dance, Dowland's "Earl of Essex" galliard (also known as the song "Can she excuse"), received a spirited performance in a fine arrangement by the modern player and lute-maker Ray Nurse.

A concluding set of pieces by John Johnson struck me as slighter than the rest. But these set the stage for two substantial encores: a ragtime arrangement of a tune that I did not recognize—perhaps a reader can identify it—and a musically convincing (and visually charming) rendition of Dowland's famous galliard "for two to play upon one lute."

Collage New Music: works by Amar, Rokowski, Czernowin, and Wyner (January 11, 2016)

Four Works by Four Composers from Collage and Labelle
by David Schulenberg

Collage New Music presented the second concert of their current season Sunday night in Edward Pickman Hall at the Longy School of Music in Cambridge. David Hoose conducted three recent compositions for chamber ensemble by Talia Amar, David Rakowski, and Chaya Czernowin, joined by soprano Dominique Labelle in the final work by Yehudi Wyner.

Collage has a long history of presenting new works by local musicians, and the four composers, each with connections to the Boston area, were all in attendance. The audience, which nearly filled the hall, included many luminaries of the local new-music scene.

A pre-concert conversation between conductor Hoose and the four composers yielded little beyond what was included in the program booklet (some of which is online on Collage's blog). I did learn, however, that I should avoid the mistake of a previous commentator who, in Wyner's words, accused the composer of being "eclectic." The term is an easy choice for describing music that is never, as far as I know, twelve-tone, serial, aleatoric, minimalist, or various other things that characterize many compositions of the last five or six decades. Indeed, none of the evening's offerings falls easily into pre-made categories, reflecting the group's and the composers' avoidance of the obvious and the easy.

Even David Rakowski's "Stolen Moments," a substantial 2008 composition which here received its area premiere, was not as straightforwardly "jazzy" as one might have expected from the initial conversation or the program notes. Christopher Oldfather gave a crisp, confident performance of the challenging piano solos in the first and last of the piece's four movements. Echoes of stride pianists James P. Johnson and Fats Waller, acknowledged by the composer, were clear enough in a couple of passages in the first movement, as were the bebop influences in some of the single-note riffs of the last. But as the piece developed I began to wonder whether the "jazz elements" that make for ready conversation were not red herrings in music whose real substance lies elsewhere—perhaps in the masterfully paced growth of each movement out of what seem at first to be just a few good-natured or quirky opening ideas.

This seemed especially clear in the two inner movements, where the nine other instrumentalists take the lead. The slow second movement, which included some expressive playing by the woodwinds (sometimes in octaves), built to a melodic horn solo accompanied by dark piano chords and quiet tremolos in the flute—one of many beautifully conceived sonorities in the piece. Tango rhythms in the third movement, mentioned prominently in the discussion, in fact emerged only gradually and served mainly as discreet accompaniment to sometimes ornate woodwind lines, again often in hard-to-tune unisons or octaves. (These made me think of the music for concert band which the composer, now at Brandeis University, mentioned as among his first inspirations while growing up in Vermont.)

The opening work on the program, which was receiving its first performance, was a commission from the Israeli-born Talia Amar. A doctoral student at Brandeis, she clearly is already a master composer (and an accomplished concert pianist). She described her "Reminiscence," for six players, as a development of an "unknown seed" which is never actually sounded in the piece. I was unable to hear this concept, reminiscent of the idea underlying Elgar's Enigma Variations, in the music. But the piece was beautifully crafted, its roughly ten minutes twice tracing an arc from relatively lively to quiet, sustained music, ending unexpectedly but very effectively with one of the latter passages.

The players executed this with exquisite attention to the often subtle sonorities, which have something in common not only with Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* (mentioned in the pre-concert talk) but also with the *Marteau sans maître* by Boulez—whose recent death occasioned appreciative comments from all four composers. Amar, who is Collage's 2015–2016 Fellow, has a fine ear for sound as well as sure compositional technique, and I look forward to hearing more of her music.

From another planet, it seemed, came "Lovesong" by Chaya Czernowin, also from Israel and now teaching at Harvard. The 2010 work, also receiving its local premiere, reflects the composer's view that any sound can be music. It is for eight players who frequently employ so-called extended techniques to produce unconventional sonorities. This of course has been going on for a long time; one thinks, for example, of music from the 1960s by George Crumb. I sense, however, that Czernowin aims at something more personal, less mythic. Certainly her music has a completely different sound, although it is not easily characterized. This piece makes much use of chattering and chirping sounds from the violin, viola, and cello (produced by quick, light bow strokes over the bridge), as well as intentionally "ugly" timbres as the bow is drawn more harshly over the strings. In moments such as the latter, which eschew any vibrato that might soften or humanize the sound, one might well understand that the composer set out to express something that is not just a "sweet and beautiful lovesong," as she put it.

Still, I must confess that, while enjoying many of the individual moments, I am baffled as to how they join into a whole, or what the constantly inventive sound has to do with the "falling in love" which the composer writes is the subject of the piece. I don't mean that as a criticism. These things might become clearer after repeated hearings. Even to an uncomprehending listener, however, the work's dramatic character—the composer described it as "like a little opera that got sucked into a bottle" (like a ship)—is self-evident in the theatricality of many gestures.

The program's title, "Voices of Now and Tomorrow," was most literally realized in the final work, Wyner's *The Second Madrigal: Voices of Women*. Composed in 1999 for performance by soprano Labelle, the work is a song cycle on ten poems by and about women that were compiled (and in part translated) by the Polish writer Czesław Miłosz. Although the composer facetiously referred to his "mistake" in writing it for a large ensemble of ten players, the music eminently succeeds in enveloping the singer in sounds "worthy of her talent." Labelle was seemingly flawless in conveying the rapidly shifting moods of the ten poems. These range from a morning song by the sixth-century Chinese emperor Ch'ien-wen (Jianwen) through the teasingly erotic "Second Madrigal" by Anna Swir (from which the composition as a whole takes its title), ending with several contemplations of age and decline.

The composer treats these themes with humor and compassion. I was touched by the sudden turn to darkness in the sixth song, "Thank you, my fate," also by Anna Swir (Świrszczyńska). This ends quietly, with just a whisp of voice accompanied by two violins, on the ironic line "how beautiful my life." That sets up the following "Cosmetics Do No Good," perhaps the most complex of the ten songs, on words by the Indian medieval poet Vidyapati. A disjointed, almost funny, introduction, deftly played by staccato woodwinds and pizzicato strings, leads to sad reminiscences of the past. These are expressed beautifully in a tiny detail, a perfectly composed and sung setting of the difficult word "coquettishness." This in turn is set aside when "the God of Passion has his will of me," underlined by stark string chords in what might have been the dramatic high point of the evening.

The penulutimate song, Li Ch'ing-Chao's "Hopelessness," expresses its exhaustion in lovely, quiet ostinatos cycling over and over in the muted horn and muted strings. But the cycle ends in a setting of

May Swenson's "Question" whose virtuosically played instrumental introduction and epilog seemed to belie the singer's plaintively repeated "how will I hide?"

Amanda Forsythe and Apollo's Fire (November 21, 2015)

Apollo's Fire, the Cleveland-based ensemble, put on a most effective show Friday night at a packed First Church in Cambridge. Directed by harpsichordist Jeannette Sorrell, the ensemble of thirteen strings and oboe was joined by soprano Amanda Forsythe in a program built around six arias from Handel's Italian operas.

That the crowd came above all to honor Forsythe was clear from the thunderous applause that greeted her after introductory remarks by Harvard professor Tom Kelly, a former board member for Apollo's Fire. But perhaps the most enthusiastic audience response followed the group's frenetic performance of an arrangement of a work by Vivaldi, one of several instrumental compositions that alternated with the vocal selections.

The cheers for Forsythe were well deserved. She sounded as good as I have heard her, in selections that ranged from a wistful lament accompanied only by basso continuo to brilliant show stoppers joined by the full ensemble. Following period practice, each aria was graced by the type of unwritten embellishment that was one of the principal attractions of this music as originally performed. This led to fireworks far more spectacular than anything Handel ever wrote. Occasionally, as in "Geloso tormento" from his early opera *Almira*, the style of the embellishments struck me as later than that of the original music. But whether these decorations were justified either historically or by the dramatic circumstances of the original arias seemed almost irrelevant, given their nearly flawless execution and the panache with which they were presented. The same might be said of the histrionic manner in which the instrumental portions of the program, especially two arrangements by Sorrell, were played and conducted.

Indeed, Sorrell and her players were arguably more dramatic than Forsythe, who communicated with her admiring listeners chiefly through her extraordinary musicality. This made her restrained gestures (and costume changes that involved three stunning gowns) nearly superfluous. For the instrumentalists, however, the visual aspect was an essential part of the show, which included a sometimes stagey type of playing—and of conducting by Sorrell, who tended to leave the actual continuo playing to lutenist Simon Martyn-Ellis. An exaggerated tossing about of hands and bows has always been effective for eliciting audience response, as performers from Paganini to Bernstein have recognized. Whether it detracts from the musical impact of a performance may be a matter of personal taste.

The high points of this one were certainly Forsythe's arias. Today a soprano enjoys the luxury of being able to perform male as well as female roles from Baroque opera, which could make the Roman emperor Nero a soprano and Julius Caesar a mezzo. Forsythe sang only arias originally for female characters, including two for Cleopatra from Handel's *Julius Caesar*. Most affecting might have been the quiet "Amarti sì vorrei" from *Teseo*, although for this listener the effect was compromised by an overly busy continuo accompaniment, with harpsichord and lute frequently getting in one another's way. This is one of several selections in which Emperor Charles VI's advice to the soprano Farinelli might apply equally to players and singers: "those never-ending notes and passages only surprise . . . if you wish to reach the heart, you must take a more plain and simple road." Forsythe did nevertheless "reach the heart" in Cleopatra's lament "Piangerò," which was paired with the same character's bravura aria "Da tempeste" to end the program. Here a listener might have been excused for simply basking in the literally over-the-top embellishments, which reached into Queen-of-the-Night realms of the vocal stratosphere.

Playing expressively alongside Forsythe in "Geloso tormento" was oboist Debra Nagy, who also

performed a fine solo from the third of Handel's so-called oboe concertos. I wish that we could have heard the whole piece, rather than an excerpt. But this was a program of excerpts and adaptations, pasted together to form the sort of quasi-dramatic sequence now fashionable. The three segments, described in the program as "First Love," "Jealousy" and "Delusions and Madness," reflected the subjects of the arias. The program's overall title "The Power of Love" was shared with the performers' new audio CD, which was marketed shamelessly throughout the evening.

It is easy to see how the Apollo's Fire approach to Baroque music has won it several *Billboard* awards. While following current trends, their performances are not unmusical or unoriginal. They clearly benefit from rehearsing and performing together regularly, unlike some other ensembles which, despite bearing readily recognized names, are effectively pick-up groups. Although all "Baroque" orchestras these days follow pretty much the same quasi-historical performance practices, Apollo's Fire has a lush and fairly aggressive string sound of a type that might once have been considered "modern" by early-music specialists. Indeed, Sorrell's arrangements and her conducting render some selections remote from anything truly historical. But the carefully worked out rubatos and dynamics in the more expressive pieces, as well as the gutsy playing in quick movements, are executed with impressive unanimity. A few minor ensemble problems Friday night can probably be attributed to First Church's difficult acoustic.

Anyone who still cares about the historical part of so-called historical performance must nevertheless express some reservations about this sort of event. Sorrell was quite wrong, in both her program notes and her spoken commentary, to describe Vivaldi's B-minor Concerto for Four Violins as music "written for teenagers." Even if he did compose it for the women of the Pietà, a sort of orphanage where he worked on and off for much of his career, many of the original players were mature women of considerable musical accomplishment. To preserve their modesty, their performances took place out of view of the listeners—hardly the rock-concert ambience that Sorrell's commentary invited listeners to imagine. (By the way, the Pietà still exists; you can visit their website here .) This concerto, which Bach admired sufficiently to arrange it for four harpsichords, was executed with great energy, but the addition of extra instruments thickened the sound, rendering opaque some of Vivaldi's carefully constructed sonorities.

Something similar must be said of Sorrell's arrangements of two other instrumental works on the program. I *think* she was joking when she accused Vivaldi of making the "mistake" of writing his "Follia" variations for just two violins and continuo (i.e., cello and harpsichord). She might have said the same of the variations on "La Bergamasca" by the earlier composer Uccellini, which opened the program. Like Respighi, Stokowski, and other twentieth-century updaters of old music, Sorrell transforms these straightforward Baroque dances into orchestral fantasias. Her arrangement of the Vivaldi work, played by the ensemble from memory, certainly spoke to the crowd, which responded with glee. But it also re-invents the anachronistic pop-ification of early music which the "historical performance" movement originally tried to get away from.

Sorrell's program notes included a helpful "Reader's Digest Version" of the opera plots, explaining the original dramatic situations of all six arias. But the repeated likening of Baroque music to contemporary commercial pop strikes me as inaccurate if not tiresome. Of course this music was popular in its day, but it possessed a deeper meaning than self-display or audience entertainment. Baroque opera was not only about "love and despair," as asserted in the program notes. It is obviously effective to market a program like this one as "Passions of Handel and Vivaldi." But, like Sorrell's arrangements, doing so imposes a contemporary sensibility on the music, whose writers and first audiences were concerned with the difficult moral choices that faced great historical figures. We may

no longer take seriously the conflict between love and duty that is so often the issue for a Queen Cleopatra or a Princess Agilea. But this conflict was a genuine ethical concern for Handel and his audiences, central to his musical dramas. His greatest characters transcend their mundane personal feelings, and it is the music that communicates this to us—although not in the arias selected for this program, all taken from relatively early in the plots of their operas.

A concert such as Friday night's is a triumph not only for the soloist but for the contemporary marketing of so-called early music. I hope, however, that anyone who admires this type of music-making (and music marketing) also recognizes that popular entertainment need not be the only model for contemporary "classical" music.

“Re-Imagined French Baroque?,” review of L’Académie (Nov. 8, 2015)

Re-Imagined French Baroque?
David Schulenberg

The audience barely outnumbered the players Saturday night at Christ Church Cambridge for a performance of “Musique pour le chambre du roi” by L’Académie. The band of fourteen strings, winds, and harpsichord presented selections by three superb French composers from just before 1700: Marin Marais, Michel-Richard de Lalande, and François Couperin.

The meagerness of the crowd, although unfortunate, was not entirely inappropriate. “Music for the chamber of King Louis XIV” was a relatively intimate affair, performed privately by a small subset of the king’s vast musical establishment. French kings were never alone, however, always attended by a host of servants and favored nobles. Nor was all the music on the program originally composed for the king’s private concerts, for it also included ballet music for the theater.

L’Académie, whose name refers to the semi-public concerts given during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was written up in the *Improper Bostonian* earlier this year for its performances in area hospitals. According to its website, the organization has been presenting in various guises and venues since 2009. Yet not a single one of the original members of the ensemble was involved in last night’s concert, which also appears to have been L’Académie’s first incarnation as a chamber orchestra.

I had hoped to hear some solo playing by the group’s new director, the Catalonian violinst Joan Plana, but had to settle for watching him lead the ensemble, for the only substantial solos were given to the two flutes, doubling on recorders. Not that this music called for the outright virtuosity demanded by the more familiar Italian music of the period. Avoiding the fireworks of Vivaldi and other Italians, French Baroque musicians followed the king in preferring an elegant “speaking” style graced by expressive ornaments and a distinctive approach to rhythm. Chamber music was expected to mirror the polite, sophisticated conversation of French literary salons. The royal orchestra (the famous Twenty-Four Violins of the King) was admired throughout Europe for its unanimity in matters of ornamentation, rhythm, and, one presumes, intonation.

It was odd that the photocopied program, while providing extensive biographies of all the players, contained no notes on the music, nor was any verbal commentary offered. The website advertised this as “a sumptuous program of orchestral music and re-imagined chamber works,” but audience members could hardly have known which pieces were presented in expanded versions of their original instrumentation. In fact all the music was arranged to some degree, but above all the works by Marais and Couperin, which were originally published as compositions for two melodic parts and basso continuo (harpsichord and bass instrument). Such pieces surely were heard in their day in varied scorings, especially when played for wealthy patrons. But whether they were orchestrated in the manner heard Saturday night, or whether doing so is to the benefit of the music, is less certain.

All three composers represented on the program are better known for other types of music: Lalande for his sacred vocal works, Couperin for his solo harpsichord pieces, and Marais for his compositions for viola da gamba. Lalande’s *Ballet de la jeunesse* and the Chaconne from *Les fontaines de Versailles* were early works, given at the famous royal palace complex in 1686 and 1683, respectively. A suite in G minor by Marais was from a set of *Pièces en trio* published in 1692, and Couperin’s *La françoise* appeared in 1726 as the opening composition in *Les nations*. Comprising a “sonade” followed by a suite of dances, *La françoise* was originally titled *La pucelle* (The maiden) and in that guise probably

dates from around 1692. Hence all the music on the program dates from shortly before or after the death of Lully, the royal musician whose operas and ballets defined the French Baroque style. Indeed, Lalande's *Ballet de la jeunesse* was performed as a substitution for Lully's opera *Armide*, not yet complete at the time (it would be his last).

Not surprisingly, Lalande's ballet music is close to Lully's in style, and only the Lalande works were written for the distinctive five-part French orchestral ensemble of the time. This may explain why these compositions were, to these ears, more successful than the "re-imagined" chamber works. Even Lalande's pieces, however, were rescored, as in the substitution of violins for violas on some inner parts, or of viola da gambas for the original bass violins, and the addition of double bass and harpsichord. These alterations merely updated the sonority from that of the late seventeenth to the eighteenth century, which is how we usually hear this music (for better or worse). But I did not understand the decision to have the violins play *sul ponticello* (near the bridge), creating a weirdly nasal or metallic sound, in the "Marche des candiots": that is, the March of the Cretans, who in the original ballet enter at this point to honor Jupiter, king of the gods. According to myth, the latter was born on the isle of Crete; here he is a stand-in for Louis XIV, who was meant to be honored, not mocked (as it seemed), in this section of the original ballet.

The music by Marais and Couperin was not well served by the expansion to orchestral dimensions. Recurring problems of intonation might have been exacerbated by the absence of viola parts to fill in the harmony, or by the combination of violins, viols, and flutes, with their various tuning systems. But these subtle pieces also suffered from the stiffness and small imprecisions of rhythm that are inevitable when as many as four or five players try to execute what were meant to be solo lines. I felt this especially in the Plainte (Lament) from the Marais suite, which for some reason was played without harpsichordist Michael Beattie, who elsewhere added an imaginative accompaniment, essential in these pieces. Other bright moments were added by flautist and recorder player Heloise Degrugillier, although I would have preferred her graceful solo in Marais's passacaille to have been echoed by a solo gambist, not by a whole rumbling bass section. Their ensemble here was impressive, but not in a way that Marais could have intended or, more important, admired.

The Couperin was the great work on the program. But the suggestion implicit in its original title about its expressive character was not taken up; the best moments were those in which the fewest musicians were actually playing. The experiment of orchestrating these pieces was worth hearing. But a more interesting experiment would be to try making something of this music with just three or four instrumentalists playing as soloists and listening to one another, rather than fiddling with the scoring and trying to follow one leader.

“Classical Echoes Exquisitely Sung and Played”: Emma Kirkby, Jakob Lindberg (Oct. 3, 2015)

The Boston Early Music Festival’s twenty-sixth concert series opened last night with a beautifully conceived and executed recital by soprano Emma Kirkby and lutenist Jakob Lindberg. The duo, who last performed for BEMF four years ago at the First Church in Cambridge, returned to that venue for a program of mostly seventeenth-century music by mostly English composers.

The program’s title, “The Golden Age Revived,” referred to the retrospective glances toward classical antiquity made in the poetry set to music on the program. Seven sets of selections presented seven themes, laid out by the singer in her program notes: “Creation,” “Metamorphosis,” “Heroines,” “Lyric Poets,” “Love, Death, and Fate,” “The Death of Dido,” and “Venus and Cupid.” All reflected the broader theme of nostalgia for an “earlier, purer, and more beautiful time” such as one also finds depicted in paintings of the period by Poussin and Claude Lorrain.

But the formal classicism of Poussin’s idealized scenes is absent from the more openly emotional though no less learned poetry of many of these songs. The latter included verses by the ancient lyric poet Anacreon, one of them in the original Ionic Greek, two others in the Latin of his Roman successors Virgil and Horace. The mostly anonymous English poems of the other selections reflected their authors’—and their original audiences’—familiarity with ancient literature as well as their fascination and identification with the mythological stories and characters that are their subjects. Intermingled with the fifteen vocal selections were four sets of contemporaneous lute solos.

This music stands on the cusp of what we call the late Renaissance and the earlier Baroque. But it has little to do stylistically with either the polyphonic motets and madrigals beloved of choral groups or the familiar cantatas, operas, and instrumental music of the Italian and French Baroque. English composers of the period famously kept to their own style, which, although sometimes abstruse, rewards sensitive performance and careful listening. Some of these selections reflected their composers’ awareness of contemporary developments on the Continents; others retained the typically English predilection for asymmetrical phrases and irregular, counter-intuitive melodic lines. These create interpretive difficulties for lesser performers, but Kirkby and Lindberg negotiated them with clarity and precision as well as freedom. Occasional bursts of florid melodic embellishment, which can drive conventionally trained performers to distraction, were executed by both as if effortlessly, with the seeming nonchalance or *sprezzatura* demanded by writers and audiences of the period.

Kirkby, who knows this repertory as well as anyone—she has been singing it for decades, and writes her own translations and commentaries—remains among the greatest living singers. Lindberg is equally a virtuoso of his instrument, always a sensitive and deferential accompanist, but also so brilliant a solo player that one audience member, during a post-concert “discussion,” was moved to ask how many fingers he has. As in her previous BEMF performance, Kirkby sat to Lindberg’s left, rising for the more dramatic selections, which were performed with vivid yet precise historical gestures and expressions. (The singer afterwards mentioned having studied Baroque stage gesture with Dene Barnett, author of what remains the standard text on the subject.)

Practically every selection on the program was a revelation of one sort or another. To these ears the shorter and simpler Elizabethan or Jacobean lute songs early in the program were particularly affecting. These began with Alfonso Ferrabosco’s “So Beauty on the waters stood,” a quiet evocation of the creation of the world from chaos. Songs about Daphne and Apollo followed, proceeding from the lovely “When Daphne fair” by an anonymous arranger to increasingly subtle settings by John Danyel and John Dowland.

Particularly intriguing were two pairs of works on parallel texts. Anacreon's famous self-deprecating salutation to his lyre was heard first in a rare setting of the original Greek by the Cavalier composer Henry Lawes, then in the same composer's completely different composition of the "Englished" text. The former was notable for particularly exquisite vocal decorations or "divisions," some of them added by Kirkby. In the latter (originally for bass voice) the performers focused more on wit, reflecting the poem's and the composer's harping on "love, love, love."

If that pair of pieces was characterized by their difference from one another, songs about Cupid by Pelham Humfrey and Henry Purcell were variations on a common template. Kirkby even employed the same theatrical gestures in both. But the performances rather proved her observation that Purcell evidently meant to outdo his predecessor, writing a more vivid and at the same time more witty setting of an amusing tale. I wonder, however, whether a performance emphasizing the differences between the two compositions might not have brought out something distinct in the earlier, more florid setting.

Somewhat larger works formed centerpieces and finales for each of the program's two halves. The lengthy monologue "Hero and Leander" by the Jacobean composer (and painter) Nicholas Lanier might better be called "Hero's Lament." Its individual verses were performed with moving theatricality. Yet the discovery of Leander's body at the very end occurred too suddenly, leaving the piece less effective than comparable soliloquies in Italian operas on which it was based, such as Monteverdi's famous Lament of Arianna (which it seems to quote).

It was nevertheless a gift to hear this, as also "La Parca" by the little-known Neapolitan composer Cataldo Amodei. Published in 1685, the joyless Italian text of the latter—"if life is a flower, its fruit is death"—depicts Atrophis, oldest of the Three Fates. Amodei's cantata echoes earlier vocal writing by Cavalli and Barbara Strozzi, but it also anticipates that of Alessandro Scarlatti, occasionally blossoming into a later type of coloratura. If neither as bleak nor as instructive as the composer must have meant it to be, this unfamiliar music by a lesser figure was certainly worth hearing.

The same goes for two substantial works by Purcell's older contemporary John Blow which closed each half. "If mighty wealth," based on another Anacreon text, was presented wittily, its contrasting sections clearly delineated. "O Venus, daughter of the mighty Jove," setting an English paraphrase of Sappho's "Hymn to Aphrodite," is, on the other hand, a serious, almost operatic scena.

The poet, from the Greek island of Lesbos, was not yet understood at the time as a lesbian in the modern sense, but simply as a devotee of the goddess of love. Blow's music depicts the grand arrival of Venus in her flying chariot, like a *deus ex machina* in the Baroque theater. Lindberg admitted, in later remarks, that the "quite busy" accompaniment, conceived for harpsichord, is almost "beyond possibility" of playing on the lute. I'm afraid that this performance was indeed less than grand, in part because here, as through most of the program, Krkby sang in a close, "indoor" sort of voice. This suited performance with a lute, but it could not fully project the grandeur of Blow's scene.

Still, only the performances of the two earliest works on the program, by William Byrd and Alonso Mudarra, might be counted as less than successful. Byrd's "Constant Penelope" was originally a consort song for voice accompanied by four viola da gambas. Lindberg's reduction of the latter to a single lute part sounded muddled in the difficult acoustic of First Church. Byrd's not so obviously expressive vocal part was slighly rushed, and its unusual English hexameter verse (pointed out by Kirkby in her notes) was presented without much distinctive character. The latter must also be said of Mudarra's austere setting of "Dulces exuviae," the original Dido's lament (from Virgil's *Aeneid*), taken

from a 1546 Spanish publication.

It is possible that these two selections, as well as John Wilson's setting of Horace's ode "Diffugere nives," might reveal more through simple repetition. Each surely contains subtleties that are hard to catch on first hearing, no matter how well performed. On the other hand, Purcell's "Music for a while," sung as an encore, was composed for the theater and communicates something in almost any performance; this one made an eloquent conclusion to the evening's music.

I have saved the lute solos for last, although they were an integral part of the program. Most, including pieces by Purcell and a suite from the Royal Consort by William Lawes (younger brother of Henry), were Lindberg's own arrangements of music originally for other instruments. I was most impressed by an intricately contrapuntal toccata by Giovanni Kapsperger. This was followed by a long ciaccona by Alessandro Piccinini, which incorporates a number of formulas also found in the somewhat more familiar keyboard pieces of this type. I was sorry that neither performer mentioned that Piccinini, who claimed to have invented the archlute, shared the classical aspirations of the song-writers on the program. His chitarrone, a related instrument, was said to have "resembled Apollo's lyre." Lindberg played neither of these instruments but rather a beautiful new twelve-course theorbo-lute by Michael Lowe; this seemed a perfect choice for the varied repertory.

I'd like to close briefly on a somewhat more personal note. Reviewers, including this one, often have reason to lament unimaginative programming by presenters who repeatedly offer up crowd pleasers performed by a few favored musicians. But no one could rightly complain about a recital as thoughtfully planned and beautifully given as this one. BEMF is to be thanked for bringing, again, two of the best living performers of this, or any, music to Cambridge.

“A Very Polished Concerto Soave” (June 10, 2015)

The Boston Early Music Festival continued its practice of introducing European performers to local audiences with a concert Tuesday afternoon by the Marseille-based Concerto Soave. I had been looking forward to this concert, as the group is primarily a vehicle for the Danish-Argentine soprano María Cristina Kiehr. Little known in the US, Kiehr has been a consistent explorer of under-performed repertories. I remember in particular her pioneering recording of sacred cantatas by Barbara Strozzi (*Sacri musicali affetti*, on the Empreinte Digital label, 1995). She also was one of the two sopranos on Cantus Cölln’s beautiful recording of the Bach motets (Deutsche Harmonia Mundi, 1997).

Kiehr’s BEMF performance was an exquisitely sung program of early-Baroque works, with special emphasis on rarely heard music by some of the first composers of opera and their contemporaries. Also featured were rare compositions of south-Italian extraction, including solo madrigals by the Sicilian-born Sigismondo d’India and two noteworthy instrumental pieces by the Neapolitan composer Ascanio Mayone. The latter were performed by harpist Elena Spotti and harpsichordist Jean-Marc Aymes, co-founder of the group; gambist Christine Plubeau also played.

Despite an intelligently planned program and many impressive and moving moments, the concert as a whole was less successful than it might have been. The mostly short selections were linked not only thematically but in terms of key or tonality. Thus the messenger scene from Peri’s opera *Euridice*, in which the nymph Dafne relates the death of the heroine, was followed immediately by a French harpsichord version of a passacaglia by Luigi Rossi. But what looks good in a printed program does not always work in practice. In this case the result was a jarring discrepancy between Peri’s quiet, austere simplicity and the more sonorous harpsichord piece—even if the latter alludes to Monteverdi’s famous Lament of the Nymph. One wished instead for silence after the long monologue by Peri, which, accompanied only by harp, was perhaps the most touching of the afternoon’s performances.

The longest and, in principle, the most dramatic selection on the program was a work new to me and, I imagine, most listeners: the cantata *Proserpina gelosa* by Giovanni Felice Sances. Here the composer —a Roman, despite his Spanish name (Sanchez)—sets a text full of vivid fulminations against Persephone’s unloved husband Pluto. These were accompanied by noisy rumblings from all three continuo players, especially harpsichordist Aymes. Yet the performance was oddly unaffecting. I suspect this was due to the over-reliance on the sort of continuo “orchestration” that is fashionable today: elaborate, busy realizations of the sketchily notated accompaniments, which here, as in most of the selections on the program, were probably conceived for performance on a single plucked instrument.

This problem was evident above all in Barbara Strozzi’s *Amante segreto*, which closed the program’s first half. The tongue-in-cheek complaint of a “secret lover,” this was taken far more seriously than it needs to be, its prevailing dance character reduced to that of a dirge. The piece’s *ciaconna* structure elicited some inventive improvisations from the harp and harpsichord. But the continual changes of instrumentation, although introducing welcome variety to the sonority—perhaps necessary, given the slow tempo—ultimately became a distraction. For this is music that depends above all on the singer, from whom we simply did not hear enough involvement, at least not in relation to what the instruments were doing

Kiehr’s sovereign technique and pure, precise diction and ornamentation were everywhere evident. Particularly impressive was the ending of Peri’s “Tu dormi”: a quiet note held out seemingly forever on the penultimate syllable of the words “il morir mio” (my death), accompanied, again, only by harp. Yet

elsewhere the seeming effortlessness of the singing worked against the dark, painful expression of some of the music. D'India's "Amico, hai vinto" is based on three stanzas from Tasso's epic poem *Jerusalem Liberated*, familiar today from their later setting at the end of Monteverdi's *Combattimento*. Yet the extraordinary harmonies which d'India used for Clorinda's dying words received no particular response. The unresolved dissonance in the final cadence—imitated by Monteverdi—passed by as if unnoticed.

The same austerity marked Aymes's performance—on chamber organ—of the famous Second "Stravaganza" by Giovanni de Macque, a Flemish immigrant to Naples. His harmonic "extravagances" seemed tame in this performance. More effective was Mayone's embellished transcription of "Ancidetemi pur," an early madrigal by another Fleming, Arcadelt. Here Aymes made good sense of Mayone's potentially baffling streams of figuration. Mayone's counterpoint, which in other hands might have become pedantic, always seemed interesting, even if the later arrangement by Frescobaldi is more imaginative.

The high point among the instrumental solos, however, was surely Spotti's performance of Mayone's Chromatic Toccata (no. 5 from book 2). This, too, might have benefited from greater attention to the piece's harmonic tensions. But the virtuoso figuration that follows the toccata's chromatic opening was clear and very expressive—no mean feat on the early Baroque instrument which we heard.

Even this, however, shared a certain sobriety and under-statedness with the rest of the program, which on the whole took on the reverential tone of old-fashioned "early" music performance. By an odd coincidence, a very different approach to much the same sort of repertory was heard in a Festival "fringe" concert that immediately preceded this one. Tuesday's performance by Les Canards Chantants at Old South Church's Gordon Chapel included settings of some of the same poets, as well as a remarkable polyphonic madrigal by d'India. It also shared the idea of melding many short pieces into a continuous, integrated performance. Yet without in any way diminishing their attention to the poetry, the "Singing Ducks" instilled their superb performances with the liveliness and theatricality that were historically an important part of the madrigal tradition. I would hope to hear Kiehr again in a future Festival concert, with a more varied and demonstrative program. But I would also hope to see the Canards given the opportunity to display their creative approach—and their equally polished singing—in a regular Festival event.

A final word about the printed program itself. BEMF is to be thanked and congratulated for including complete texts for Kiehr's concert, in both the original Italian and in excellent translations by Ashley Mulcay and Ellen Hargis. Including both is absolutely essential, especially for music such as this, which depends so much on understanding the words—and which includes some truly great poetry. Many in the undeservedly sparse audience were not following the words; perhaps they were content to enjoy the sheer beauty of the singing, or perhaps they were unwilling to spring $15 for the program book. But it's worth it.

Musicians of the Old Post Road: Franz and Georg Benda (Apr. 13, 2015)

Melodrama at the Modern
by David Schulenberg

The Musicians of the Old Post Road, who have long been exploring neglected repertories in their imaginatively conceived programs, devoted a particularly fascinating afternoon to the music of Franz and Georg Benda at Suffolk University's Modern Theater on Sunday. The chief feature of the event, billed as "Beloved and Betrayed," was a performance of what is probably Georg's best known and most important work, the melodrama *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Here the musicians were joined by actors Robert Walsh and Marya Lowry, as Theseus and Ariadne. The program had been previously performed the night before at Worcester's Mechanics Hall.

The Bendas were members of one of those extended musical families, such as the Bachs, who in past centuries furnished performers and composers to various European courts and cities. Of Bohemian origin, the family sent its most prominent members to Berlin, where Franz was the favorite violinist of Prussian King Frederick "the Great" during the mid-eighteenth century. The Benda dynasty continues to produce musicians; you can find a recording of *Ariadne* conducted by Christian Benda (on the Naxos label, naturally).

Georg, or Jiří Antonín in his native Czech, started out, like his brothers, as a court musician writing chiefly instrumental music. But, like his more famous colleague and friend Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, after leaving the court he became primarily a composer for the voice, in his case of compositions for the stage. Although now rarely performed, these have always received respectable notices in histories of European music. They also have a place in the history of European theater, as Benda collaborated with some of the most important literary writers and stage directors of his day.

It was therefore a rare treat to be able to see this work in a capable theatrical production. The story of Ariadne, familiar from Greek mythology and also from Richard Strauss's opera of the same title, is set here as a pair of monodramas—two scenes, each featuring essentially just one speaking character: Theseus, the Athenian prince; and Ariadne, the Cretan princess whom he abandons on the island of Naxos after she has helped him slay the minotaur and escape from the labyrinth. Benda's *Ariadne* is also a melodrama, in the original sense of that word: a stage form that enjoyed great popularity at the beginning of the Romantic period, in which spoken words are accompanied and interspersed with instrumental music. Sometimes described as "spoken opera," melodrama was an anticipation of film and television, the music punctuating and sometimes accompanying the action and dialog (or, in this case, a pair of dramatic monologs).

In a cynical age, melodrama can seem naive or ridiculous. The only familiar examples today are isolated scenes in later operas that use it—*Fidelio*, *Der Freischütz*, *La traviata*, *Wozzeck*, Strauss's *Ariadne*. Benda's example, the first of several by him, premiered in 1775. It reflects the first glimmers of Romanticism in music and literature, and its original staging incorporated Grecian costumes and histrionic gestures that have since become subjects of dismissive parody. Yet it proved sufficiently popular in its day for the composer to publish it in multiple versions that reduce its original orchestral score to either strings and contintuo or to a single keyboard instrument. We heard the string version Sunday.

Although Benda's earlier music resembles that of his older brother and other colleagues at Berlin, his theater music can remind a present-day listener of Mozart, the young Beethoven, even later Romantic

composers. A particularly effective parallel with nineteenth-century music drama is the return of the noble opening music toward the end of the second and final scene. This ties together a composition that otherwise risks seeming formless, entirely dependent on the words for its coherence. Yet the brief musical passages that Benda inserts between the spoken lines occasionally anticipate certain clichés of nineteenth-century music drama. Performing such a thing today therefore runs risks that would not have been apparent when the work was new.

If the musicians were taking a risk with this performance, far more so the actors. I didn't notice anything in the publicity or the program notes for this performance that stressed its "historical" aspect, and I'm sure that the intention was simply to present an effective present-day production. Yet the music in Sunday's performance was "historically informed," and I wonder whether a more satisfying whole might have been achieved if this could have been true of the staging as well. Even one eager to avoid what is derisively referred to as "teapot acting" might imagine a more historically oriented approach to gesture and text delivery that would more closely parallel what is implicit in the music.

The Modern is a small theater whose size and intimate connection between stage and house were perfect for this program, in this respect resembling the famous court theater at Gotha, Germany, where *Ariadne* was first performed. The lower level, seating perhaps 150, appeared to be sold out, and the occasional dull rumble of an Orange Line train passing by under Washington Street presented no serious competition to what was on the program. For *Ariadne*, the musicians sat to the left side of the stage, the red and black chinoiserie decoration of the German-style harpsichord (played attentively by Michael Bahmann) harmonizing with the black backdrop and mainly red wallpaper of the theater. (King Frederick owned a similarly decorated instrument.)

The action, such as it is, took place to the right and consisted chiefly of walking about within the confined space, in general avoiding the more demonstrative types of gesture likely to have been seen in early performances. The two actors, both founding members of the Actors' Shakespeare Project, used an elegant English version of Johann Christian Brandes's text by Pamela Dellal. (Brandes based his script, written for his wife Charlotte, on a poem by Gerstenberg, who also provided song texts for C. P. E. Bach which Dellal has sung most effectively.)

The use of a translation has no bearing on the "historical" character of the production; the first editions give the text in French as well as German. Translations of the text as well as arrangements of the music for various performing forces were clearly a part of the eighteenth-century theatrical tradition and are equally useful today. But very few theater professionals have yet to pay the type of attention to historical performance now routinely taken for granted by musicians. Partly for this reason, I'm afraid I did sense a disjunction between what the musicians and the actors were doing on the stage.

Brandes's duodrama (his term) has no exact parallel in conventional theater today. In place of dialog between speaking characters, one has a dialog between one actor and an orchestra. The actor speaks a line; the orchestra responds with a musical phrase of comparable length. In dialog with another actor, one looks, gestures, and moves in relation to the latter; what does one do in dialog with instrumental sound, whether or not it is issuing from players visible to the audience? Strike a pose? move about the stage? wave one's arms or bat one's eyelids? And how should one speak one's lines or conceive one's role? Should one try to make the presentation resemble a more ordinary theatrical experience? Or should one consciously adopt a manner of speaking and moving that is remote from contemporary stage conventions?

Stage practices of 1775 might strike a contemporary audience as a weird combination of over- and

under-acting: excessive, quasi-operatic vocal rhetoric combined with striking dramatic poses rather than naturalistic movement. Conceived at a time when opera was more pervasive than today, establishing norms for theater as a whole, Benda's *Ariadne* presents severe challenges for any actor or viewer who is sensitive to both the text and the music. The latter, as in opera, establishes style, emotional character, even pacing that one might expect to be reflected in the speech and movement of the actors.

The music received an exceptional performance by the four strings and harpsichord. These were led by violinist Sarah Darling, whose exquisite solo playing included some touching passages near the end, as Ariadne reminisces about her mother in far-off Crete. Equally impressive was the absolute unanimity of rhythm and intonation of the five players, as well as their complete engagement with the drama. The brief musical interjections formed an effective dialog with the two speakers, despite continuously varying tempos, meters, and emotional characters (or "affects," as they were known at the time). The only aspect of the music that failed to convince were the imitations of trumpets, sounded as Theseus is about to run off to his ship. In the original orchestral version these are of course played by actual trumpets; I'm not sure how many in the audience got the point here.

I also am not sure how consistently the cues given by the music were taken up by the actors or by the production as a whole. Performed in modern dress, without sets and only basic lighting, this *Ariadne* lacked visual elements that would have alleviated the austerity of a drama in which the title character, stranded by a cliff on a dessert island, watches her lover's ship sail off, never to return. The sole prop, a set of plain black wooden steps, represented the rock from which Ariadne eventually throws herself into the sea. We first see her alone, asleep on those steps (which could not have been very comfortable) as Theseus enters to deliver the first monolog. This left it a little unclear that she and Theseus have spent the night together, and that he abandons her before daybreak; the grand opening music in E-flat, which returns later, seems to represent night or darkness. After his departure, the sun rises during an orchestral crescendo in the new key of C major (shades of Haydn's *Creation*); I wish that the lighting, designed by Nick Robinson, had come up here instead of brightening the stage a few moments later.

I felt that Walsh, as Theseus, might have done more to catch the hero's ambivalence between love and duty, which Brandes expressly inserted into his text and which Benda's music underscores. Even Lowry, as Ariadne, although more animated and expressive, struck me as more restrained than the music called for. Both also sometimes spoke too soon, their first syllables not quite audible under the still resonating sound of the musical passage that had just finished. One passage did achieve real intensity: when Ariadne imagines herself in Hades, beset by furies and other monsters depicted vividly by the orchestra, the voice and gestures rose to the same rhetorical level as the orchestra. Here we caught a glimpse of the "operatic" style of acting that Benda and Brandes must have taken for granted and which might be necessary to bring this piece off with some of its original effect.

Nevertheless, this experiment succeeded on the terms set for itself (and by what I presume was its budget). Early-Romantic melodrama such as this could probably never hold a candle to opera in terms of mass popularity. But it would be a disappointment if this production is to be a one-time thing. Benda wrote other melodramas, including a *Pygmalion* that was at least as popular as *Ariadne*. I hope that the Post Road players will consider offering some such work in a coming season.

Georg Benda's duodrama was preceded on the program by a flute concerto in E minor written by his older brother Franz (František). The latter was famous for his good humor, which comes across in his autobiography (readily available in English). This concerto, however, is a fiery composition reminiscent of so-called "storm and stress" efforts by C. P. E. Bach. Although now Benda's only flute

concerto that is at all familiar, it was probably written originally for his own instrument, the violin. This would explain the absence of more obviously idiomatic or brilliant writing for the solo part, which even in the quick movements tends toward the lyrical and expressive, despite the energetic writing for the strings.

Suzanne Stumpf, who with cellist Daniel Ryan is co-Artistic Director of the group, played the solo part on a copy of an eighteenth-century Palanca flute by the fine German instrument maker Martin Wenner. The dry acoustic did not favor the solo flute, however, and this particular instrument seemed to lack the strength required especially by the many relatively low passages in the solo part (particularly on the note D-sharp, for which Benda's colleague Quantz famously added a key to his own flutes). I wondered too about many slurs in the solo part, which might be vestiges of the violin version; on the flute they made some of the scales and other passagework a little too smooth, lacking character.

That said, Stumpf created some very expressive moments through well-calculated rubatos in the quick movements. Her cadenzas in the first two movements were tastefully conceived, and the strings played with the same animation and precision heard in *Ariadne*. This was, then, a perfect prelude to the drama that followed.

Grand Harmonie: Mozart and Mendelssohn (Apr. 11, 2015)

Classical and Romantic Instrumental Works Reconstructed
by David Schulenberg

Grand Harmonie, the period-instrument ensemble specializing in Classical and early-Romantic music for woodwinds and strings, concluded its 2014–15 season with a performance Friday night in Cambridge at the Longy School of Music's Pickman Hall. The program, billed as "grand harmonie: deconstruction" (uncapitalized), was to be repeated the following day in New York. It comprised two major works by Mozart and an early composition by Mendelssohn.

In a rarity for the group, whose founding oboist was unable to play on this program, none of the selections included the double-reed instrument which is nearly ubiquitous in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century orchestral repertory. Instead, listeners were given a rare opportunity to hear the early version of Mozart's serenade for winds K. 375 together with his E-flat major symphony K. 543 (no. 39 in the traditional listing), both scored without oboes. Also on the program was Mendelssohn's Sinfonia no. 12 in G minor for strings. Paired with the wind serenade on the first half, the latter made for a "deconstruction" of the ensemble, which was reconstituted as a full orchestra on the second half. There Adam Kerry Boyles joined the group as conductor.

The serenade, composed in fall 1781 during Mozart's first year in Vienna, is one of the composer's three major works for the Austrian "harmony" ensembles or wind bands from which Grand Harmonie takes its name. Originally for pairs of clarinets, bassoons, and horns, by the following spring the work had gained two oboes, whose parts Mozart created by sometimes doubling, sometimes re-assigning material originally given to the horns and clarinets. Yet the early version heard Friday night is by no means austere or lacking in color, at least as played by Grand Harmonie.

This music, perhaps more than any other from the period, benfits from the rich, dark foundational sound of the "natural" horns and "classical" bassoons, which blend splendidly with one another. To this the slightly woody or pungent period clarinets add a certain bite, at least when played with the clear articulation favored by players Thomas Carroll and Elise Bonhivert. Performing with near-perfect intonation and unanimity of phrasing, this is clearly an ensemble that has worked hard to achieve a distinctive sound and musical character. It would be wonderful to hear them explore more of the "harmony" repertory, with or without oboes—perhaps including non-Viennese works as well, such as the little-known woodwind marches and sonatas of C. P. E. Bach.

The Mozart serenades, however, are surely the pinnacle of this repertory, and the sextet version of K. 375 also tests each of the players, especially the first clarinet, who usually plays the leading line. In fact every part has passages as demanding as what one might encounter in a concerto. Carroll was impressive in his solo licks throughout the work, but so too was second hornist Yoni Kahn in the central Adagio, when the main theme is restated in a variation that includes wide-ranging passagework for the lower parts. (It is not unusual for the second horn, which receives a distinctive style of writing in Viennese Classical music, to have particularly virtuoso passagework.) I would be remiss, too, not to mention both the superb ensemble playing and the expressive solos of the two bassoons, Nate Helgeson and Allen Hamrick, although I am obliged to disclose that both are former students of mine (and one of the string players is in a class that I am now teaching).

One can read that Classical serenades are light works, but this one, although slighter than Mozart's later *Gran Partita*, is no *kleine Nachtmusik*. The opening Allegro and the Adagio have substantial chromatic

passages which can be tricky to negotiate on historical woodwinds; these were executed expressively, with no evident difficulty. Even the rondo finale, which starts off sounding like one of Haydn's more comic efforts, has a little fugato in C minor at its center, which was played with panache. My only regret about this performance was that it omitted the second of the five movements. Perhaps it seemed superfluous to play two minuets, each with its own trio. But I had been looking forward to hearing the solo for the two horns in the first trio, whose dark C-minor coloration complements that of the second trio in A-flat major.

The other Mozart work, the symphony, followed the intermission. Here the twenty-six players plus conductor rather filled the small Pickman stage. The modern practice of adding conductors to period-instrument ensembles, often viewed as a necessary concession to present-day performing conditions, seems to me rather an avoidance of a challenge that has been successfully met by other ensembles, "modern" as well as "period." This performance did not lack for the type of spontaneity that characterized actual eighteenth-century playing, as when the woodwinds added little embellishments to their solos in the third movement. And I might have been the only one who missed the sound of a fortepiano or harpsichord doubling the cellos and basses in their numerous solo entries in the first movement. Yet the Mendelssohn sinfonia came off perfectly well without a conductor, and I would love to see Grand Harmonie emulate historical directing practices, which Christopher Hogwood brought to this repertory, directing symphonies such as this from the fortepiano with great success more than thirty years ago.

Be that as it may, this was an engaging and energetic performance of one of Mozart's most challenging orchestral works. The E-flat symphony is the least-often played of Mozart's last three symphonies, which have always been recognized as his greatest contributions to the genre. Less impassioned than the G-minor and less grand than the "Jupiter," it nevertheless is the most Beethovenian of the three, pointing forward to the first efforts of Mozart's younger contemporary and (briefly) pupil. Of course it was actually Beethoven whose early style echoed Mozart's, as conductor Boyles suggested in a brief lecture-demonstration preceding the performance. Here he had the orchestra demonstrate a few "progressive" moments in the work, such as a sharp dissonance in the slow introduction that has an echo in Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony. He might also have mentioned that Mozart's symphony plays with motives and remote modulations in ways that must have given suggestions to Beethoven. One senses as well, especially in the last two movements, a brusque humor that today is associated with the later composer.

Possibly it was the small size of the stage or the unfavorable acoustic of the hall that made this performance less than entirely successful. It was marked by fine lyrical playing from the woodwinds, especially flutist Sarah Paysnick and first horn Elisabeth Axtell. Yet the eight violins were often overpowered by the brass and timpani, whose sound seemed to be amplified by their placement at the back wall. The exposed position of the violins at the front of the stage, moreover, tended to underline the occasional imprecisions of pitch and rhythm that marred an otherwise accurate performance.

The strings were heard to far better advantage in the Mendelssohn work, the second-to-last of the thirteen sinfonias for string orchestra written by the composer as a teenager prior to the five more familiar symphonies for full orchestra. Like most of his other sinfonias it was probably modeled to some degree on similarly scored works by the oldest son of Bach, Wilhelm Friedemann, which Mendelssohn would have found in the music collection of his great-aunt Sara Levy. The influence of the elder Bach is equally evident in two fugues, especially one in the final movement. There, however, Mendelssohn displays his youthful inventiveness by writing the second theme in this style—a unique merging of Baroque counterpoint with Classical sonata form (when this theme comes back in the

recapitulation, it becomes a double fugue). Other passages in the same movement combine echoes of the Third Brandenburg Concerto, another all-string piece, with bits of Mozart, including the final chords from the latter's great symphony in the same key (no. 40).

Principal first violinist Emily Dahl led the ensemble of sixteen players in a polished reading of this fascinating but rarely heard work. I'm not sure whether this slightly récherché piece, which at one level is a brilliant composition exercise, is entirely successful as a piece of music. But it does offer hints of the types of melody and chromatic harmony that would characterize the "mature" Mendelssohn of just a few years later. And it's possible that the latter aspects of the work could have been brought out in a performance that took a more Romantic approach to the work's neo-Baroque counterpoint. The frequent running notes in the quick movements might have benefited from a more legato, less articulate approach, and there might also have been more dynamic shaping of the lines and phrases. This is so despite the fact that Mendelssohn failed to notate most of the crescendos and diminuendos that were probably as much a part of playing Bach as of more recent repertoire in 1823, when this piece was written.

Both "deconstructions"—the Mozart serenade for winds and the Mendelssohn sinfonia for strings—are types of music that need to be heard more often. Although the audience Friday night was disappointingly small, Grand Harmonie has consistently explored repertories that are worth hearing but which are neglected by other performing organizations. It has done so in programs that are imaginatively constructed and compellingly played. Music-making of this quality and creativity does not easily earn large-scale corporate backing, but it deserves encouragement and support from anybody who cares about music that lies off the well-trodden paths followed by others.

Tenet and Green Mountain Project: Monteverdi's Vespers of 1610 (Jan. 14, 2015)

The magnificent Romanesque Revival nave of St. Cecilia Parish in Boston was the setting Monday night for a performance of Monteverdi's "Vespers of 1610" by TENET and the Green Mountain Project. Directed by Scott Metcalfe and featuring an ensemble of twenty-seven of the region's leading early-music singers and instrumentalists, the same program had been performed two days previously at the Church of St-Jean-Baptiste in New York.

The work known today as Monteverdi's Vespers of 1610 has been familiar to music historians for at least a century but came to the attention of the general musical public rather more recently. At least three arrangements for modern performing forces that came out during the period after World War II made this one of the first examples of music from before the eighteenth century to enter the repertory of mainstream orchestras and choral societies. The Boston Symphony Orchestra even performed it here in 1974 under Michael Tilson Thomas, with Susan Davenny Wyner among other soloists; Thomas most recently conducted the concluding Magnificat in San Francisco just last month.

Yet the work's purpose, exact contents, and basic aspects of its intended performance practice and form have all been mysterious, setting off vigorous debates among specialists. These have approached in intensity the better-known and not entirely unrelated disagreements concerning the composition of Bach's choir. Several scholars, notably the American musicologist Jeffrey Kurtzman, author of a book and numerous instructive articles on it, have devoted entire careers to this music.

Some have held that Monteverdi's Vespers, like Bach's "Art of Fugue," was never meant for integral performance. In fact it does seem to have been composed for a ceremonial celebration during the composer's lifetime. But it was also meant to demonstrate Monteverdi's capabilities as a composer within an idiom—music for the Roman Catholic liturgy—with which he had not yet, at this point in his career, been identified.

Unlike Bach's final masterpiece, it dates from the middle rather than the end of the composer's career. Moreover, it was probably intended to serve as a sort of portfolio that would help the composer get a better job than the one he currently held—not as a collection of pieces exemplifying good composition for the benefit of students.

Monteverdi did in fact gain a far more prestigious position just three years later, moving from the ducal court of Mantua to the Basilica of St. Mark in Venice. But the Vespers, although sharing some things with the music of Giovanni Gabrieli, Monteverdi's great Venetian predecessor, had no exact precedents, nor did it find any exact imitations.

As published the Vespers comprised thirteen distinct compositions: five large choral psalm settings; four motets mainly for smaller groups of voices; a hymn whose stanzas are set for varying numbers of voices and instruments; a unique "Sonata" for eight instruments, joined by a single voice that enters periodically to repeat a brief prayer to the Virgin Mary; and, enfolding all this, a brief opening versicle, based on the famous "Toccata" that opened Monteverdi's opera *Orfeo* of three years earlier, and a concluding multi-sectional Magnificat.

Monteverdi provided two versions of the Magnificat, one for just six voices and one for seven voices with instruments; naturally we heard the latter on Monday night. We also heard six chanted antiphons, such as would have been added in an actual Vespers service to precede each of the psalms and the Magnificat. Absent were the additional instrumental pieces which certain conductors, notably Andrew

Parrott, sometimes substitute for some of the antiphons, following the practice of Monteverdi's time.

I've described the music and its background to this degree of detail because without it one can't fully understand either Monteverdi's achievement or that of the Green Mountain Project. Assembling these diverse components into a satisfactory evening of music is no easy task. The director must choose from a panoply of very different editions and conflicting scholarly opinions about such fundmantal things as the pitch, instrumentation, and order of the individual movements—and, of course, the number of singers. Metcalfe by and large followed the findings of Parrott, whose views, originally set forth in a 1984 article in *Early Music*, remain persuasive to most specialists despite persistent critiques.

Until last night's performance I hadn't felt the unqualified admiration that the work instills in many. The style is distinctive, although one must speak here of at least two quite distinct styles. The motets, for one, two, or three solo voices (always with organ continuo accompaniment), resemble, in a general way, the similarly scored settings of secular poetry that Monteverdi published during the following decades in his last two books of madrigals. The motets share with the latter an intense musical rhetoric, seemingly reflecting an urge to "paint" musically every affective or pictorial phrase in the text. This has been criticized by the musicologist Gary Tomlinson, not entirely unfairly, as rendering the composer's secular works of the period mannered and incoherent.

The psalms and the Magnificat, on the other hand, incorporate the so-called reciting tones which would have been chanted in an everyday Vespers service. Consisting largely of a single repeated note, these "tones," when embedded within Monteverdi's polyphonic texture, produce long stretches of music based on a single harmony. All the busy counterpoint and embellishment sung simultaneously by the other voices cannot disguise the essentially static nature of this sort of composition—however ingenious Monteverdi's ever-varying ways of incorporating the reciting tone into the texture, and however grand the sheer sound of the ensemble.

The psalm settings sometimes treat individual phrases of the text almost as pictorially as the motets. Yet other passages are austere in tone, not obviously expressive or engaging with the words in any direct way. Similar considerations apply to the Magnificat, whose text is a sort of New Testament psalm. Each verse of Monteverdi's setting, although even more varied in its treatment of voices and instruments, uses the same basic technique as the psalms.

Hence another challenge for the director of a complete performance is to avoid any sense of longueur in the psalms, while encouraging the soloists toward a coherent interpretation of the motets, avoiding mannerism. Beyond that, every movement of the work poses challenges, often profound, for players as well as singers: virtuoso figuration for the soloists, tricky rhythms and counterpoint for the ensemble. How well did they succeed?

This was one of the finest performance of any type that I've heard and a model for historical performance, fitting imagination and passion to the most scrupulous musicological scholarship. The program was the last in a series of four concerts given on four consecutive days in New York City and Connecticut as well as Boston, but there were hardly any signs of fatigue. This performance left no doubt in my mind that the work deserves its reputation and that here Monteverdi created a startlingly original and convincingly integral work.

Metcalfe's elegant program notes mentioned a few very minor departures from a literal interpretation of the work as originally printed in 1610: chiefly a few extra instrumental doublings of some of the vocal parts. I also noticed the use of three singers rather than one to sing some of the sustained cantus firmi,

the prolonged reciting tones around which Monteverdi constructs his counterpoint.

Presentation by a group makes the cantus firmi marginally less expressive or individual, particularly in the Sonata. But these lines, which look deceivingly simple in the score, can be taxing when sung by a soloist. They also can become inaudible, swamped by the much busier music that surrounds them.

The program, which lasted nearly two hours without intermission, comprised no fewer than thirty distinct numbers or movements. Their varied scoring and the varying placement of the singers and players within the church led to an elaborate choreography that seemed to go off without a hitch.

I don't know how closely the positioning of the musicians resembled that which would have occurred in a historical vespers service of this type. But having the different types of music—chant, choral polyphony, certain individual vocal or instrumental parts—emanate from varying locations within the room added to the diversity of effect without distracting from the substance of the music.

The main body of performers usually stood in the usual place at the front of the audience, grouped in one or two semicircles around a small portative organ and two lutes (which played throughout as the continuo). Singers, ranging in number from just one or two to ten, were flanked on either side by instruments: six strings and five winds. The first antiphon was chanted by a second group of singers standing behind the main group, but most of the subsequent chant antiphons were sung from the organ loft at the back of the church.

Singers and players walked discretely to the side when not needed in a given piece. This sensibly took place after the next number had begun, eliminating breaks in the program. There was no applause until the end, when the entire ensemble received the standing ovation it well deserved.

Metcalfe, who is also a fine violinist, directed the opening versicle and response while playing his instrument, as he did several other portions of the program. But most of the larger pieces were directed in the conventional manner; the smaller ones were without conductor.

In a performance of this quality, it is impossible to single out individual performances or numbers as outstanding; they all were. Nor is it possible even in an extended review to mention every wonderful moment.

The chanted antiphons were done with the exquisite attention to phrasing and intonation that we have come to expect from these singers, several of whom also perform with Metcalfe's Blue Heron. The style of the chant singing was probably not that of Monteverdi's day, rather a modern one perhaps approximating some sort of medieval practice—but reconstructing early Baroque chant remains largely unexplored territory.

In the polyphonic movements, lively tempos and expressive, at times even dramatic, singing minimized the danger of monotony even in the more austere numbers. I wondered a little about this approach only in two psalms, "Lauda Jerusalem" and especially "Nisi dominus," whose elaborate opening, in ten-part counterpoint, tends to blur at the rapid speed which Metcalfe chose. But perhaps this was Monteverdi's intention, and only at this tempo could the subsequent dialog between the two five-part choirs of this psalm have attained the intensity that it did here.

Over the course of the evening, Jolle Greenleaf, artistic director of the ensemble, formed a marvelous pair with fellow soprano Molly Quinn in many numbers. Particularly expressive was Greenleaf's

exquisitely shaped solo on the final line of the motet “Pulchra es.” Quinn brought unexpected drama to many of her own solos, notably in passages within the first psalm, “Dixit dominus.”

Equally imaginative was the addition of occasional small ornaments to the cantus firmus, which I noticed particularly from Jason McStoots in the “Laudate pueri”; this helped reduce any possibility of his part in this piece sounding merely dutiful. The surprise ending of this heavily scored psalm, in which most of the voices and instruments drop out, leaving McStoots and fellow tenor Owen McIntosh in unison on a single note, was a striking moment.

In the motet “Duo seraphim,” McStoots not only gave a vivid performance of the demanding coloratura but also discretely led the ensemble, with perfect timing. He would have to be considered among America’s finest early music specialists on the strength of this performance alone—which is not to take anything away from the splendid singing of his fellow seraph McIntosh, or the equally agile melodic figuration of tenor Brian Giebler, who joined them at the end of this motet.

“Nigra sum,” the first of the motets and in modern terms a tenor solo, was sung beautifully by Aaron Sheehan. Another motet, “Audi coelem,” received a powerful presentation from Sumner Thompson, who was listed in flyers for the concert as a tenor but described in the program booklet as a baritone. This reflects the fact that Monteverdi’s “tenor” parts lie low by modern standards. “Audi coelum” requires strength in the low register and sweetness on the (relatively) high notes, both of which Thompson provided abundantly.

Thompson also furnished an almost shattering “omnes” (“Everybody!”) at the climactic moment in this motet, calling for six further singers to join him at what Metcalfe described in his notes as “the most directly personal and touching moment of the work.” This was indeed the most affecting portion of the concert, unless that occurred with the following antiphon “Ecce Maria,” which was chanted by several of the men standing in the center aisle of the nave, effectively from within the audience.

One of the controversies involving the performance of Monteverdi’s Vespers concerns the relative pitch level of the psalm “Lauda Jerusalem.” The lower pitch adopted here made it possible for mezzo-sopranos Luthien Brackett and Virginia Warnken to take the top vocal parts in this number, echoing one another perfectly from opposite sides of the ensemble.

Although voices are present in every number—indeed, Monteverdi left not a single purely instrumental composition—the Vespers includes a “Sonata sopra Sancta Maria ora pro nobis” which is largely for the instrumental component of the ensemble. The three strings and five winds (with continuo) are joined intermittently by what was originally a single soprano repeating the prayer “Holy Mary, pray for us.”

Although the Sonata therefore resembles a litany, it is a lively virtuoso composition for the players. The two pairs of high instruments stood on opposite sides: Metcalfe and fellow violinst Ingrid Matthews to the left, cornettists Kiri Tollaksen and Alexandra Opsahl on the right, all playing exquisitely.

Matthews and Tollaksen also contributed some fine embellishment in some of the stanzas of the following movement, the hymn “Ave maris stella.” A cellphone that went off just after the end of the latter was, fortunately, not very loud and did not quote any recognizable piece of music, which says something for the taste of the audience.

The Magnificat, like the Sonata, is as much an instrumental as a vocal composition. I noted in

particular the strong solo singing of Thompson and baritone Jesse Blumberg in the “Et exaltavit.” To this the recorders, heard only here, and trombones provided a splendid quiet contrast in the “Quia respexit.” (The recorders were played ably by cornettist Opsahl and trombonist Greg Ingles, with the ever-reliable Mack Ramsey and Erik Schmalz on the lower brass parts.)

Metcalfe contributed some fine violin playing to the “Fecit potentiam.” In the ensuing “Deposuit,” an inspired echo effect was produced as Matthews and Opsahl turned away from the audience—and from their instrumental partners, Metcalfe and Tollaksen—to give the impression of distance as they echoed the latter. Echoes, a favorite Baroque device, were also heard in“Audi coelum,” where Blumberg, I think, sang perfectly, albeit invisibly, from behind the choir.

The “Esurientes” calls for two altos to sing phrases of quiet sustained tones without accompaniment, alternating with the instruments. Brackett and Warnken likewise accomplished this task perfectly, remaining right on pitch. In the final “Gloria patri,” the echoing coloratura of baritones Thompson and Mischa Bouvier, singing from opposite sides of the choir, was as strong and exhilirating as if it was the beginning of the long program. Yet this did not preclude some lovely continuo accompaniment in the quieter parts of this movement from lutenists Hank Heijink and Daniel Swenberg.

I am afraid that I can say little about organist Jeffrey Grossman’s playing, other than saying the best that can possibly be said about any continuo player: that he supported the other musicians selflessly and without a single evident miscue, throughout a long but constantly engaging evening of thoroughly accomplished musicianship.

“A Bach Christmas? Bah, Humbug!,” Handel and Haydn Society (Dec. 19, 2014)

Early music aficionados of a certain age are likely to remember and may still own LP recordings with titles such as “A Baroque Christmas,” containing seasonal choral selections from the late sixteenth through the early eighteenth centuries. The earlier pieces tended to be fairly short and singable by the school groups and community choirs that were among the first participants in the early music revival, especially in Germany. Originally intended for small ensembles, the pieces were and still are often performed by relatively massive forces, sometimes with menageries of exotic accompanying instruments that were among the attractions of these performances, even if remote from historical practice.

The Handel and Haydn Society’s holiday program Thursday night at Jordan Hall echoed this tradition, albeit with some concessions to current taste and fashion, including a relatively well-tamed “period” instrumental complement. What vocal works by the late-Renaissance composers Hassler and Victoria, or even the more recent Corelli and Alessandro Scarlatti, have to do with “A Bach Christmas,” as the event was billed, is unclear to me. But the main numbers were two major vocal works for the Christmas season by Bach. Of course, that name still signifies only Johann Sebastian when it comes to music marketing—despite the observances earlier this year honoring his son Carl Philipp Emanuel, who like other members of the family also composed works for the Christmas season.

The program, which will be repeated Sunday at 3, was conducted by Scott Allen Jarrett directing the Society’s Period Instrument Orchestra and Chorus (disclosure: Jarrett is at Boston University, where I will be teaching a course during spring 2015). The Bach works at the end of each half of the program followed shorter selections by earlier composers, encouraging the old view of the latter as mere predecessors to Bach’s perfection of music at the end of the Baroque. Commentary in both Teresa Neff’s pre-concert “conversation” and Jarrett’s remarks during the concert tended to reinforce this view. Even if accurate, this does not engender appreciation of music by such major composers as Sweelinck and Schütz—represented here by minor works that have long been favorites of choral conductors looking for easy repertoire to fill out a program.

I’ve previously noted the poor attendance at the pre-concert talks, now starting at 6:30. Perhaps this justified Jarrett’s filling the rather lengthy intervals between pieces with additional talk. I’m sure he didn’t mean to call Scarlatti a sixteenth-century composer, or to leave the impression that Bach was the author of the texts he set to music. Cantata 40, which ended the first half, is entirely typical in beginning, like other works from Bach’s first year at Leipzig (1723), with a choral setting of a biblical text. Bach sets this passage from the first epistle of John in a particularly vivid way, emphasizing the military character of the ongoing battle between good and evil. Alas, this chorus was taken a bit too quickly for the second subject of the movement’s double fugue to be articulated as vociferously as it might have been. Indeed, speed seemed to be the main aim in several other numbers on the program—a point that I will get to.

This was a big night for the horns of the orchestra, played by principal Elisabeth Axtell and Yoni Kahn. They maintained an admirably high fielding percentage, particularly in the aria “Christenkinder, freuet euch” from the Bach cantata. Here tenor Marcio de Oliveira, stepping forward from the chorus as did all the soloists, sang with the requisite clarity and lightness in this most challenging of Bach vocal numbers. Oboists Stephen Hammer and Lani Spahr and the continuo strings Guy Fishman, Sarah Freiberg, and Erik Higgins performed smashingly here as well.

Principal first and second violinists Susanna Ogata and Krista Buckland Reisner had their finest

moments in another tenor aria, "Ich will nur dir zu Ehren leben" from Part 4 of Bach's Christmas Oratorio, joining Patrick T. Waters in a performance that had all the agility and clean articulation that the counterpoint calls for. I was also impressed by Bradford Gleim's spirited execution of the bass aria "Höllische Schlange" in the cantata. The so-called echo aria from the oratorio ("Flößt, mein Heiland") was sung with just the right combination of strength and good humor by soprano Jacquelyn Stucker. Brenna Wells provided the brief vocal echoes (of words such as *ja*, yes, and *nein*, no) from the back of the hall, while oboist Hammer echoed himself onstage. His repeats of certain phrases at a quieter dynamic level were so effective that I found myself looking around to see where the other oboist was hidden.

Scarlatti's little Christmas cantata "O di Betlemme" was sung fetchingly by soprano Sonja DuToit Tengblad together with the strings. But this chamber piece might have been better served by a smaller, more intimate presentation. The arias, which Jarrett conducted despite involving only four or five musicians, seemed a bit stiff or studied. And I didn't sense much attention being paid to the harmonic tension in the so-called chains of suspensions that Scarlatti uses to express the "chains" (*catene*, presumably of sin) mentioned in the second aria.

This work was performed with the delicacy it deserves. The opening "Verbum caro" by Hans Leo Hassler struck me as more agressive than it needed to be. Here, as in Victoria's five-part "Alma redemptoris mater," Jarrett's dynamic shaping of the lines was worked out in an almost orchestral manner. Yet, perhaps because of the size of the group, I didn't sense the care for the rhetoric of individual words and phrases that has become a hallmark of more historically oriented vocal ensembles.

Intimate little numbers such as Schütz's "spiritual madrigal" "Ach, Herr, du Schöpfer" and Praetorius's setting of "Es ist en Ros" (by Vulpius) were probably intended for ensembles of four or five singers, with continuo. In my view they don't benefit from "a cappella" performance by a chorus of seventeen, even one such as H & H's, performing as usual with nearly impeccable intonation and breath control. The Schütz piece, incidentally, is the composer's sacred recasting of the first work in Marenzio's seventh book of five-part madrigals. There, in a curious reflection of the program's pastoral theme, the shepherd Mirtillo pines for the shepherdess Amarilli.

Quite a crowd was onstage for Sweelinck's "Hodie Christus natus." Here the voices were joined by the entire band of eighteenth-century instruments (save the horns). To perform music of around 1600 in this way is almost as much of an anachronism as Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*, based on music two centuries older. Bach, to be sure, orchestrated Palestrina's music, and the effect in either case can doubtless be exhilarating. But he was not pretending to offer "period" performance.

Equally exhilirating and unhistoric was the presentation of Corelli's famous Christmas Concerto, which may have achieved a land-speed record for shortest and quickest performance of this work. Even the quasi-vocal emulation of Palestrina's style at the beginning, meant to suggest the darkness and mystery of Christmas Eve, struck me as rushed, as did the sometimes infelicitous embellishments added by the soloists in the quick movements. Only the closing pastorale achieved some of the elegance which is as crucial to Corelli's style as his fabled fire and spontaneity. The latter, however, are reduced to stereotypes in an over-frenetic performance.

The audience, which nearly filled Jordan Hall, did not seem to mind. And I'm sure that many who have read this far will not share my reservations about what was arguably as much a community event as a concert. Who could possibly object to the accompaniment of bass Donald Wilkinson by six members of

H & H's Youth Chorus, singing chorale snippets in two ariosos from the Christmas Oratorio? Surely only a Scrooge could object to the use of child choristers, a fine twentieth-century tradition, as evoking manufactured sentiment? (I can hear the comments already.)

"Two 18th-Century Comedies From BEMF," Pergolesi intermezzos (Dec. 1, 2014)

"A Weekend of Chamber Opera" from the Boston Early Music Festival opened Friday night with a performance of two comic intermezzos by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi at Jordan Hall. Following what has become an annual post-Thanksgiving tradition, the semi-staged production will be repeated Sunday afternoon at 3.

Anyone who has read anything about eighteenth-century European music knows that Pergolesi is credited with establishing a new approach to staged musical comedy. Yet his most famous work, *La serva padrona* (Maid as Master), is rarely performed and, despite the present-day revival of so many other works from its time, is not even well represented in recordings. Therefore it was a bit of inspired programming for BEMF to offer it on a double bill with another work of the same type, *Livietta e Tracollo*. Both were first heard between the acts of two of Pergolesi's serious operas in 1733 and 1734, respectively. But each was soon being presented on its own throughout Europe. Today they make fine choices for concert performance together in one evening, as each contains a little under an hour of music and, unlike a full-scale opera, involves only two singing characters and no scene changes.

Nevertheless, to present these works effectively requires considerable skill and imagination, particularly in a conventional concert hall. The BEMF production team, led by artistic directors Paul O'Dette and Stephen Stubbs and opera director Gilbert Blin, have taken the same basic approach here as in their 2012 production of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* in the same space. The action takes place on a small platform at center stage, frequently spilling out onto the surrounding floor, which singers and dancers share with a chamber orchestra of about a dozen players. (A video of the 2012 production as well as rehearsal photos of the current one can be viewed on the BEMF website at http://www.bemf.org/pages/concerts/14-15_boston/chamberopera.htm.)

Although the audience only half filled the hall, they were enthusiastic, and at intermission I overheard references to the "fun" they were having. Eighteenth-century Neapolitan musical comedy was certainly meant to be fun, although one can miss the point in audio recordings or in staged performances that overlook the need (obvious from the librettos) for active participation by the non-singing parts. This production is enlivened by Anna Watkins's colorful period costumes and the historically inspired, often exquisite gesture and dance choreographed by "movement coordinator" Melinda Sullivan. Yet it's impossible to report on this production or get to its music without mentioning a few aspects of its basic concept that I found problematical, however much fun they involved.

Each of Pergolesi's intermezzos comprises two "parts" consisting in turn of two scenes each. It would have been easy to present the four scenes of one work as the first half of the performance, followed by the four scenes of the other. But instead the scenes of the two works alternated, so that scene 1 of *Serva* was followed by that of *Livietta*, and so on. We were told, in pre-concert remarks by O'Dette, Stubbs, and orchestra director Robert Mealy, that this manner of presentation paralleled the works' original productions. There the scenes of each intermezzo filled the intermissions between the acts of a serious, fully staged opera. BEMF's "interleaving" of scenes from the two works also made it possible, according to Blin's program note, for the plots and characters of the two intermezzos to "merge" at the end of each half of the program. In practice, this meant that cast members of one intermezzo returned to the stage as non-speaking figures at various points in the other intermezzo, and the entire cast of both works could be onstage at the end of each "act."

But interrupting a tragedy for a comic divertissment is not the same as alternating scenes of two separate comedies. Nor does "merging" two little operas have much in common with the eighteenth-

century practice of pasting together favorite scenes or arias from various works to form a so-called *pasticcio*. In a reply to a percipient question from the audience during the pre-concert discussion, O'Dette assured us that the scene breaks in BEMF's production corresponded with those in the original. But the musical and dramatic transitions at those points were somewhat jarring, and there was a risk of redundancy in the second half of the evening, as the climactic scene of one intermezzo led to that of the other, followed by the two finales played back to back.

A further problem for this viewer was the fussy, incessant stage business of a type that is now fashionable even in "historically informed" performances such as this one. It's clear from the librettos of both works that the two singers in each were always accompanied onstage by one or more silent parts. These play crucial roles in the action: an additional male servant in *Serva*, two friends of the female lead in *Livietta* and an accomplice for Tracollo, her would-be robber and later lover. It is crucial to invent movement and action for these characters, following what we know of eighteenth-century gesture, dance, and the improvised *commedia dell'arte*.

But for me there was a gaping contradiction between Pergolesi's famously simple, so-called *galant* musical textures and BEMF's contrapuntal postmodern staging. Thus we might see not only the servant Serpina and her befuddled master Uberto engaging in dialog on the central platform, but simultaneously a pantomime by her fellow servant Vespone and further carryings-on by cast members of the other intermezzo elsewhere on the stage. The part of Vespone was played and danced with expressive wit by Carlos Vespone; Caroline Copeland, Ryan Began, and Melinda Sullivan were the graceful dancer-actors in *Livietta*. But with the orchestra also playing in constant view, the result is a visually complex spectacle, amusing at times but inevitably distracting attention away from the music and the essential action. Even the overture, cleverly borrowed from the opera that originally enfolded *Serva*, had to be played as accompaniment to superfluous mime and dance, a cliché of present-day "Baroque" opera productions that should be immediately retired.

I found it remarkable that the players, singers, and dancers brought off this complicated confection without a single evident slip-up or failure of ensemble. The four singers—Amanda Forsythe and Douglas Williams in *Serva*, Erica Schuller and Jesse Blumberg in *Livietta*—executed their roles with unfailing comic aplomb. *Livietta*, although less well known than *Serva*, has arguably the richer music. I was especially impressed by Blumberg's aria "Ecco il povero Traccolo," which threatened to be genuinely moving until its mock-tragic character was made clear toward the end (perhaps this was done more broadly than it needed to be in order to make the point). I was also delighted by Schuller's clear and perfectly articulated execution of arias such as "Io non posso resistere," in which the coloratura was not audibly affected by the concurrent stage business. This is not to take anything away from Forsythe's equally adroit singing in the face of sometimes needlessly complicated histrionics.

Much credit for keeping things together must go to BEMF's veteran musicians, including concertmaster Mealy and the continuo team of O'Dette and Stubbs on lute and guitar, Avi Stein on harpsichord, and Phoebe Carrai on cello. (Disclosure: Mealy, Carrai, and several other players are present or former colleagues of mine on Juilliard's Historical Performance faculty.) I did feel that the large continuo group occasionally played more agressively than was necessary, given their onstage placement. On the other hand, the violins and viola, playing one to a part, were not quite sufficient in what should be a string-dominated orchestra.

Nevertheless this was indeed a lot of fun, expertly and ingeniously presented. Should either of these works have been more than that? Did Pergolesi, who died at twenty-six, less than two years after the premiere of *Livietta*, create something really new in either of these intermezzos? Could they be played

for deeper expression and perhaps fewer easy laughs? Certainly their so-called Neapolitan musical style could produce more touching, and musically more spectacular, works like the serious operas of Hasse, which Bach knew and which deeply influenced his sons and pupils. I don't think that BEMF's experiment of "pasting" *Serva* and *Livietta* together worked. But one can't fault BEMF for trying, and this production is a fine demonstration of creative anachronism that is both historically inspired and genuinely inventive.

“Rameau Arranged for Harpsichord,” Kenneth Weiss recital (Nov. 2, 2014)

The American harpsichordist Kenneth Weiss performed a solo recital Saturday night at the First Church in Cambridge as part of the Boston Early Music Festival’s twenty-fifth concert season. Weiss, who has long been based in Paris, played an all-Rameau program, featuring keyboard arrangements of instrumental numbers from the composer’s stage works.

Solo harpsichord recitals were a regular part of Boston’s musical scene at the beginning of the early-music revival. Dutch harpsichordist Gustav Leonhardt—one of Weiss’s teachers—performed here often, and I remember attending as a student not only his recitals but those by Anthony Newman, Luigi-Ferdinando Tagliavini, and my teachers John Gibbons and Martin Pearlman, among others. Over the years, however, harpsichord recitals have become rare offerings for major concert presenters like BEMF, probably reflecting a trend that seems to have led to a reduction in solo piano performances as well. Singers, as well as conductors of orchestral music, now catch more attention even from patrons of older repertory.

Weiss’s superb playing Saturday night made a case for more frequent harpsichord performances. (Disclosure: until last spring, he and I were colleagues at The Juilliard School, but like many part-time faculty at conservatories and universities we never actually saw one another there, let alone talked or compared notes.) Unfortunately, cold, rainy weather may have deterred more from attending Saturday’s performance, and the sanctuary of First Church, only about half full on this occasion, is not a good space for solo keyboard music. Front-row listeners, seated on rather uncomfortable wicker chairs, could hear well, but just a few rows back it required great concentration to follow the music, and many details were lost, particularly in quick pieces.

The lengthy notes in the program booklet did not need to defend the practice of making idiomatic keyboard arrangements of music originally composed for other media. Bach famously adapted many compositions to the keyboard, as did Rameau himself, reflecting a centuries-old French tradition of arranging favorite dances and vocal compositions for the harpsichord, often improvisatorily. What was new during Rameau’s career—from the teens of the 18th century to his death in 1764—was the precise setting out of keyboard music in notation, specifying details that had previously been left to the player. This practice extended to arrangements, which in the hands of Rameau and (probably) Marie-Rose Forqueray—likely transcriber of her husband’s compositions for viola da gamba—became a sphere of virtuoso keyboard music in its own right.

Weiss himself has contributed to this genre, last year publishing a volume of arrangements from the 1739 version of Rameau’s *Dardanus*, a *tragédie en musique*. The program opened with a complete performance of this “Suite from *Dardanus*,” beginning with the overture and concluding with the chaconne, traditionally the grand finale of the dance scenes that periodically interrupt the action in French musical dramas of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A similar suite from Rameau’s previous musical tragedy, the 1737 *Castor et Pollux*, rounded out the first half.

Rameau was perhaps the best dance composer of all time. In their original forms, the compositions on the program are remarkable for the variety of character, color, and movement that they present within the conventional types of music used for late-Baroque French dance. It would be difficult to find unidiomatic moments in Weiss’s arrangements, which faithfully preserve the character of Rameau’s originals. They reflect a lifetime of study and performance of Rameau’s music—both original keyboard pieces and stage works (which Weiss has conducted). If the test of an arrangement is that it should sound as if it was composed originally for the instrument on which it is played, Weiss’s versions passed

admirably. I particularly enjoyed the First Rigaudon from *Dardanus*, cleverly set out as a *pièce croisée* played by the two hands on different keyboards of the two-manual harpsichord—a magnificent 1987 instrument by Allan Winkler based on eighteenth-century French models.

After intermission, Weiss returned to play three original harpsichord compositions from Rameau's *Pièces de clavecin* of 1724, followed by the composer's own arrangements of music from *Les indes galantes*, his *opéra-ballet* of 1735–36. Three encores, all played with aplomb, included "Les sauvages" (the original harpsichord version of a dance number later incorporated into the closing scene of *Les indes*) and two arrangements from Rameau's *Pygmalion* by his younger contemporary Claude Balbastre.

As effective and colorful as all these arrangements may be, Rameau's original harpsichord pieces are richer musically and more challenging for player and listener, though not always in the most obvious ways. Daringly, Weiss chose three of Rameau's most beautiful slow compositions: "Les soupirs" (Sighs), "Les tendres plaintes" (Tender laments), and "L'entretien des muses" (the Muses' discourse). Each requires, and received, perfect timing and execution of the dozens of expressive little figures—trills, arpeggios, and the like—that are called ornaments but which in this style are essential to the music. These three pieces were the high point of the program for this listener, more impressive than the quickest or even the most expressive of the arrangements, which after all derive from the less profound moments of their original stage works. Only here, particularly in the quietly impassioned rhetoric of the last piece, did we sense the full depth of Rameau's creativity as well as Weiss's complete mastery of the harpsichord and of French eighteenth-century style.

If I had to observe one problem in the evening's performance, it was Weiss's tendency, shared with his mentor William Christie, of (intentionally?) rushing certain lively or dramatic numbers. What may work for an audience who can see the singers or the action on stage can be less effective when one must rely on the ear alone to follow the music. It did not help that quick passages tended to be blurred by the acoustic of First Church. As a result, many exquisite details were lost, although the general effect of impetuousness was certainly communicated in such numbers as the "Ritournelle vive" from *Dardanus*, originally the entry of the sorcerer Isménor at the beginning of the second act. In the "Air pour Borée et la Rose" from *Les indes*, the alternation between breezy and wilting passages was dramatic. But the windy sections rushed by too quickly to be completely comprehensible, a violation, I think, of the aesthetic of clarity that was taken for granted by 18th-century French theorists, including Rameau (who was a prolific writer on music as well as a composer).

I wonder, too, whether more might have been conveyed to listeners if the program had been broken up into smaller segments. From the first days of the early-music revival, suites from Rameau's stage works have been popular repertory for recordings. But although it is easy to distinguish the tracks of an audio disc, it can be hard to follow a long series of as many as a dozen short dances in a live performance, especially when some numbers run together or are repeated after an intervening one (as in the case of several alternating minuets and the like). I fear that, as a result, a certain element of communication was missing or at least not as distinct as it would have been with clearer breaks between pieces. Not all listeners may have cared, but it does help to be sure from the outset whether one is listening to a gavotte or a minuet, rather than having to figure it out after the piece has started (and even the fundamental distinction between duple- and triple-time pieces was not always immediately apparent in the echoey ambience).

Much as I appreciated the extensive program notes, I wish that these had stuck to the facts rather than indulging in currently fashionable notions of "musical history as a social phenomenon" or the death of

the composer. Rameau's dates were given wrongly in the program, and no date at all was provided for one of the three stage works. Concise plot summaries for the latter (which were described rather imprecisely as "operas") would have been more helpful than the learned but sometimes wandering commentary.

I did find illuminating Weiss's own brief remarks about his transcriptions, which, he told us, grew out of his work as *répétiteur* (rehearsal keyboardist or vocal coach) with Christie's Les Arts Florissants. This underscored the improvisatory element in any effective "translation" of orchestral music to the keyboard, which he succeeded in projecting to listeners while rendering Rameau's music as colorfully on the harpsichord as it appears in its original orchestral guise.

“Diabolical Trills and Other Trickery,” Handel and Haydn Society (Nov. 1, 2014)

Diabolical Trills and Other Tricks From H & H

The second Friday concert in the Handel & Haydn Society’s bicentennial season took place on Halloween night at Jordan Hall. In observance of the occasion, sixteen members of the Period Instrument Orchestra performed selections that included Tartini’s famous “Devil’s Trill” Sonata for violin and basso continuo. This, however, was the only sonata and the only post-Baroque work on a program that otherwise comprised somewhat earlier 18th-century Italian concertos for strings, six by Vivaldi and one by his older contemporary Torelli.

H & H’s concertmaster Aislinn Nosky led the ensemble, serving as soloist in the Tartini sonata and in four concertos for violin with strings and continuo. Two other works were group concertos or concerti grossi with multiple soloists. Also on the program was Vivaldi’s cello concerto in F, no. 410 in the catalog by Peter Ryom (now the standard listing of the composer’s output). Friday’s performance was dedicated to the memory of Boston mayor Thomas Menino, who would have appreciated the silly hats and other holiday paraphernalia worn by most of the players. The program will be repeated Sunday afternoon at 3.

Like the works with which H & H opened its season, these are mostly crowd pleasers, and like most instrumental music of their time they are heavy on formula. Yet four of the Vivaldi concertos were good enough for J. S. Bach to arrange them for keyboard instruments, and the popularity of this music is no reason to sniff at it. One might have liked to hear something else by Tartini, who was a prolific and imaginative composer as well as a thoughtful writer on music, admired in his time as a theorist. But only the cello concerto could be accused of showing its composer at something less than his most inventive, even as it gives the soloist a chance to shine in some of the most challenging passages from the composer’s roughly two-dozen cello concertos.

Vivaldi of course wrote several hundred concertos for one or two violins. Those on tonight’s program were all among the relatively small number that Vivaldi chose to publish, indicating their special place in his output. Four appeared in *L’estro armonico*, op. 3, a set of twelve concertos issued in 1711 whose title means something like “Harmonic invention.” Vivaldi (or his Amsterdam publisher) must have meant harmony only in the generic sense of a coordinated ensemble of musicians, rather than harmony in the modern sense of chords and chord progressions. But the players reflected the title in their precise coordination and nearly flawless intonation throughout an evening of spectacular showpieces.

Guy Fishman, the orchestra’s principal cellist, joined Nosky and H& H’s assistant concertmaster Susanna Ogata as soloist in the D-minor concerto grosso op. 3, no. 11. Ogata was also violin soloist in the A-minor double concerto op. 3 no. 8. Otherwise, however, this was Nosky’s evening. This was true even in the double concerto, where Ogata, playing the first solo part, demonstrated finesse equal to Nosky’s. Yet in the concluding movement, where Vivaldi gives the first player the hardest work, it is the second that gets to shine, playing a singing melody in several passages against the more athletic principal part.

The audience, which filled the hall to perhaps three quarters of its capacity, responded with great enthusiasm. These, however, were performances that emphasized the surface qualities of the music, focusing on speed and energy in quick movements and efficiency in the slow ones. The Allegros of the two A-minor pieces, including the solo violin concerto op. 3, no. 6, were especially marked by very quick tempos and an almost brutal emphasis on nearly every downbeat. This made for a rock-like

intensity, but it obscured the variety of texture and scoring that both Nosky and H & H's program annotator Teresa Neff mentioned in spoken remarks. I saw no reason for the heavy, old-fashioned allargandos used to end these concertos, unless it was to invite audience applause, in which case they succeeded.

Modern accounts of late-Baroque Italian music focus on its dazzling virtuosity, yet Bach found more in it. In fact, the quick movements of the D-major solo concerto op. 3, no. 9 received a more restrained performance than usual. Whether this reflected a considered interpretation of its character, however, was unclear; Bach chose this particularly grand piece to open his series of harpsichord arrangements. On the whole, this was Vivaldi played without much attention to the quirky "bizzaria," alternately clever and expressive, for which he was admired in his own time.

From a technical point of view the performances were certainly outstanding. Fishman demonstrated some impressive trick bowings in the quick movements of the cello concerto and inventive, if slightly anachronistic, embellishments in the repeated sections of the Largo. The latter's accompaniment, for continuo alone, was furnished very finely by cellist Sarah Freiberg and lutenist Daniel Swenberg, switching to guitar in this piece. Here he showed how this instrument, usually reduced to providing percussive rhythmic effects in modern "period" ensembles, can be played with suave elegance.

Torelli's concerto in E minor op. 8, no. 9, which closed the first half, is a remarkable work whose entirety might well be described as "erudite and eloquent," to quote a contemporary description of the composer which Neff applied to the second movement in her program notes. Continuo harpsichordist Ian Watson provided a particularly expressive accompaniment in the slow portions of this movement; all the violins joined Nosky in unison on the repeated sections of the quick section (the original seems not to call for this variation of the scoring, although it was effective).

The final movement contains several remarkable passages in which rapid figuration for the soloist accompanies a much slower melody in the bass line. The latter was hammered out rather more insistently than necessary, but it did raise the question whether Torelli was quoting some popular tune here (if so, no one seems to have identified it). More problematic, again, was the tendency to accent almost every beat, despite the clear invitation to a broader and more eloquent type of phrasing in the long notes of the bass throughout the movement.

To open the second half of the program, Nosky prefaced the Tartini sonata by narrating its story to the audience. I wish, however, that she had used the occasion to make a case for our hearing more of Tartini's music than this hackneyed piece. The late Brandeis University music professor Paul Brainard found Tartini's violin sonatas sufficiently important to catalog them in his doctoral thesis, where the present one bears the designation g5. That it was inspired by a dream of the devil playing an impossibly difficult piece is likely, in fact, to contain a kernal of truth.

Accompanied by a continuo group that included Fishman as well as Watson and Swenberg, Nosky gave one of the clearest performances of the piece that I have heard, although also one of the shortest, thanks to the omission of all the repeats, which made it seem a bit of a miniature. In fact it is neither a joke nor a mere display piece, and the closing movement, containing the famous trills, has a singular design that alternates between expressive ariosos and diabolical allegros. Here the eponymous passages were done as well as I've heard them, played not only in tune but in time. On the other hand, the opening siciliano movement, meant to be a graceful dance, was rather heavy, lacking the *sprezzatura*, a sort of noble ease in the face of difficulty, that was an essential part of mid-18th-century *galant* style even in technically difficult music such as this.

Any such sins, however, might be forgiven in consideration of the fine performance of Vivaldi's "Grosso Mogul" Concerto in D (R. 208) that concluded the evening. Why it is called the "Big Shot" concerto is unknown, but it may well have been played by Pisendel, concertmaster of the Dresden orchestra and friend of J. S. Bach. The famous harpsichord solo in Bach's Fifth Brandenburg Concerto was very likely inspired by Vivaldi's extended cadenzas or, more properly, *capricci* in the two quick movements. Arguably the best piece on the program, this was the best played and the first performance I've heard, whether in the original version or Bach's organ transcription, in which the capriccio in the last movement did not wear out its welcome. Nosky, showing no signs of fatigue as she neared the end of a demanding program, shaped this final solo very effectively, with imaginative timing and pacing, mixing in what I thought were some harmonics in one or two very high passages for a nice color effect.

A closing word about Neff's pre-concert talk. From the steady trickle of late-comers, I wonder whether the new 6:30 starting time for these presentations is too early; if they started fifteen minutes later, would there still be time for them before the 7:30 concert opening? It was fitting that the talk began by drawing attention to two early 19th-century images in the evening's program booklet. Neff observed the value of the drawings, which depicted two of H & H's instrumentalists from the period, for reconstructing early nineteenth-century performance practices. Among these was the use of a small instrumental component of just 12 players, as well as the manner of holding the violin, closer to what we now think of as a "Baroque" grip than a modern one. By the same token, however, I wish that the music on the program had not been described as being for soloists and "orchestra." The concertos were conceived by their composers as chamber music, and indeed they were performed as such by Nosky and her colleagues.

Such playing, and not merely the use of "period" instruments, is part of the enduring legacy that the ensemble has inherited from the late Christopher Hogwood, who, as Neff duly noted, led the organization's adoption of historical performance style in 1986. One hopes for further programs of this sort, dedicated to more adventurous selections: perhaps a Tartini violin concerto, or one of the many equally extraordinary ones by Gottlieb Graun? maybe a flute concerto by Quantz (but not in G major), or a keyboard concerto by C. P. E. Bach? None of these would disappoint the sort of audience that was present Friday night, and they might even attract some who chose to stay away from a program of largely familiar compositions.

“A Nameless Mass As Sweet As Any,” Blue Heron vocal ensemble (Oct. 19, 2014)

The vocal ensemble Blue Heron opened its sixteenth annual subscription series with performances Friday in Weston and Saturday in Cambridge of “A Mass for St. Augustine of Canterbury.” I attended Saturday’s concert at the First Church in Cambridge, Congregational.

The program consisted chiefly of an anonymous and English mass without title (“sine nomine”) from about 1540. Only a group with the musical mastery and the popular following of Blue Heron could come close to filling so large a space with a program devoted chiefly to an anonymous composition from an obscure period of early music history. In principle, attaching a composer’s name to a work should not make any difference to how we hear it. But anonymous music rarely attracts crowds, for knowing the composer gives us some basic expectations of what we will hear and how to listen to it. Not knowing who wrote the music makes the listening experience more difficult, or at least less predictable.

In the present case, even related works that bear a composer’s name are almost as mysterious. For this mass belongs to the little-known period of English church music that followed King Henry VIII’s break from Rome but preceded the establishment of a distinctly Protestant order of service, with a corresponding new musical style. As director Scott Metcalfe explains in his typically detailed program notes (available online), most of the known English composers of this period are represented by barely a handful of works. Robert Hunt’s votive antiphon “Ave Maria, mater Dei,” the only other polyphonic work on Saturday’s program, might as well be anonymous. Only one other work bears his name, and we know essentially nothing about him.

Actually, as Metcalfe admits, some 20% of the music on the program was by neither Hunt nor the anonymous composer of the mass. In both works the original tenor part, one of five vocal lines, is lost and has been reconstructed by the English musicologist Nick Sandon. These works therefore join the growing list of reconstructions performed and recorded by Blue Heron from this neglected repertory, which is preserved in a unique but incomplete set of manuscript partbooks at Peterhouse in Cambridge (England).

Given the unfamiliarity of this music, only an expert could determine whether Sandon’s reconstructions are stylistically appropriate. I was a little suspicious of one or two passages in the anonymous mass in which only the three lowest vocal parts are singing. Here I thought I heard rather more of what musicians call parallel motion than I would expect in this irregularly patterned music. But it is entirely possible that I misheard this, or that what I did hear has a precedent elsewhere in this repertory. In any case, this beautiful but vocally taxing music was sung almost flawlessly, with only the barest hints of fatigue detectable during the final section of the mass.

This music, predating the more familiar Elizabethan choral music of Tallis and Byrd by a generation or more, is only roughly comparable to what was being written during the same period on the Continent by Gombert and Clemens—whose music was performed in Cambridge a year and a half ago by Stile Antico (reviewed here). The English avoided the carefully integrated, seamless counterpoint of the latter, in which all the voices share in the presentation of clearly defined melodic ideas. Rather we hear deliberately heterogeneous music, with less regular sharing of melodic motives (what the English called “points”) between the voices. Conventionally worked-out passages may give way to a sudden burst of activity in one part, as when the “treble” (soprano) ascends into long, glowing arches—sung splendidly by Jolle Greenleaf, Sonja Tengblad, and Teresa Wakim—during the “Crucifixus” and the third “Sanctus” acclamation. Rarely are these moments directly related to the meaning of the Latin

words to which they are sung.

Metcalfe alluded to this last point in extended remarks that followed the intermission (more on that later). In his written comments, he rightly describes the melodic writing as "quirky, angular, and busy," although these should not be taken to be negative features of music in which beautiful surprises seem to represent a high aesthetic principle. Comparable features characterize the two chants with which the program opened, both taken from the Sarum (Salisbury) rite of medieval England—not the more familiar Gregorian chant repertoire.

The introit "Sacerdotes Dei benedicite" honored St. Augustine of Canterbury—not the fourth-century Augustine of Hippo in north Africa who was one of the Doctors of the Catholic Church, but the Augustine who brought Christianity from Rome to the Anglo-Saxons in 597. As Metcalfe notes, the connection of this chant with the mass is uncertain—thus putting in question the theme of the program as a whole. But it was beautifully performed, as was the chanted Kyrie "Orbis factor" that followed. One of the remarkable features of Blue Heron is that, although most of the thirteen singers heard Saturday night have distinguished careers as solo performers of opera and other types of music, in both chant and polyphony they blend unselfishly into an ensemble of unparalleled cohesion. Chant, although lacking harmony, is not easy to coordinate. Blue Heron sings it with an expressive freedom that seems effortless but must reflect much rehearsal and a shared understanding of the music.

Much the same goes for the four anonymous mass movements (Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus; English composers of the time rarely set the Kyrie in polyphony). Following medieval tradition, these are constructed on a "cantus firmus" or chant melody sung in long notes. As Metcalfe explains, the placement of this melody chiefly in the "mean" (alto) part is one of several distinctive features that make it impossible to ascribe the work to any known composer. Another is the use of what we would call quick triple time at the end of the Gloria, Credo, and Agnus. A legacy of older medieval ways of structuring polyphony, these climactic closing passages were sung with virtuoso aplomb. I was particularly struck by the ending of the Credo, whose final "Amen" concluded (in typical English fashion of the period) on a series of unexpected but perfectly tuned harmonies.

Hunt's votive antiphon "Ave Maria, mater Dei" followed the intermission, preceding the last two sections of the mass. Today it might be described as a short motet. There was no need for Metcalfe to apologize for his prefatory comments on the work, which took the form of a brief lecture illustrated by musical examples drawn from Hunt's composition. Members of the audience afterward expressed their appreciation for this part of the program, even though Metcalfe promised it would not be a regular part of future concerts.

Arguing that this English repertoire, like contemporary music on the Continent, was inspired by rhetoric, Metcalfe showed how Hunt constructed his work out of brief musical ideas invented for each phrase in the text, with the most important phrase receiving the most extended musical elaboration. Yet I was not convinced that Hunt used dissonances to depict the ideas of sin and death, as would become customary among Continental composers a generation or two later. The work's sharpest dissonances (the "cross relations" familiar to aficionados of English Renaissance music) seemed to be reserved for the concluding Amen—an extended passage which, although strikingly composed and performed, does not serve any obvious rhetorical purpose. Rather, like corresponding passages in the mass, the lengthy Amen struck me as inspired by purely musical thinking, and perhaps also by the delight in musical sensuality to which Metcalfe also alluded—and to which the Protestant reformers of the period objected vehemently, putting an end to the tradition to which this music belonged.

The zeal with which not only music but images and other works of art would soon be destroyed in Reformation England was the subject of a pre-concert lecture by Harvard English professor James Simpson. Simpson focused on Henry VIII's dismantling of the cult of the saints, especially that of Thomas à Becket, the twelfth-century archbishop of Canterbury who had fatally challenged the authority of another King Henry (Henry II). The most important connection to the evening's performance, which might have eluded listeners who did not also read Metcalfe's program note, was that the very music we were hearing was probably copied into its sole surviving manuscript for performance at Canterbury Cathedral. Those who heard it must rejoice for its survival and for its superb restoration by Sandon and Blue Heron.

“H & H Begins 200th Season,” Handel and Haydn Society (Oct. 11, 2014)

Boston’s Handel and Haydn Society opened its bicentennial season with a program of crowd pleasers Friday night at Symphony Hall. It was odd, given the historical significance of the occasion, that only one of the organization’s titular composers was represented. But the evening was evidently meant to showcase its chorus and string players in a program chiefly of late-Baroque favorites by Handel, Bach, and Vivaldi.

The nearly full house greeted each offering enthusiastically, above all an athletic performance of the “Summer” concerto from Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* that propelled most of those present to their feet. The audience got to applaud themselves at the end of the concert, which closed with the “Hallelujah” chorus from Handel’s *Messiah*. This was done as a sing-along, the words flashed as supertitles on a screen above the stage. Several tenors and basses in my section of the audience were particularly strong, singing their parts from memory. In so doing they demonstrated to what degree experienced choral singers still make up the audience for H & H, founded in 1815 as a choral society on European models such as the Berlin Sing-Akademie.

Preceded by a generously catered reception for donors, and with free cupcakes for all provided during the intermission, program itself was interspersed with remarks by various speakers, including H & H’s executive director Marie-Hélène Bernard, artistic director and conductor Harry Christophers, and concertmaster Aisslinn Nosky. To demonstrate the organization’s commitment to education and the community, the professionals were joined onstage in several numbers by the students of the Young Women’s Chamber Choir and the Young Men’s Chorus.

The concert opened with the toccata from Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*, performed by trumpets high in the second balcony accompanied by somewhat unorthdox drum and timpani playing onstage (Monteverdi himself did not write any percussion parts). This introduced the first of Handel’s four Coronation Anthems, *Zadok the Priest*, which was done smashingly—although the work can hardly fail to make a grand effect with a chorus of forty brilliant soloists and and an orchestra of some thirty equally brilliant players. The latter nevertheless seemed at times almost overwhelmed by the voices, at least from my vantage point.

These same forces, minus the winds, were less congenial in Bach’s motet *Singet dem Herren*, a work composed for eight voices and perhaps ten instruments. It would be understandable, given its traditions, if H & H never acceded to what is now the prevailing view among music historians that the great majority of Baroque choral works, including most of Bach’s, were written for much smaller forces than those heard last night. Yet, as with human-induced climate change, there are consequences for ignoring demonstrable facts. In this case, the relatively benign result is that H & H really is no longer an “early music” organization as that expression is generally understood. It is simply a very successful, if slightly stodgy, pillar of its community, as indeed it has been for most of its long history.

There is nevertheless something thrilling about hearing a Bach motet performed as cleanly and energetically as we did last night, even if the result resembled an orchestral arranagement of a string quartet. Christophers has melded both chorus and orchestra into a seamless machine whose sound is probably more technically assured than at any time in the recent past. In Handel’s *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, which followed, he demonstrated much the same approach in a purely instrumental work, giving it almost Verdiesque long, legato lines, quite remote from the more articulate or rhetorical approach cultivated by many so-called period ensembles. This did not preclude the electrifying effect of prefacing the overture with a drum-roll, a trick I first heard in Philippe Herreweghe’s 1993 recording

of Lully's *Armide*—although the idea grew rather tiresome on its third or fourth repetition in later movements. Still, it was a nice touch to place the competing trumpets and horns on opposite sides of the stage, so that their alternating entries produced a stereo effect (the horns won, demonstrating a significantly higher fielding percentage).

The second half opened with Handel's third Coronation Anthem, *The King Shall Rejoice*, followed by a welcome curiosity: John Stevenson's "They Played, in Air the Trembling Music Floats." Sung, according to Teresa Neff's program note, on H & H's first concert in 1815, this little motet for men's chorus and organ was a pleasing exercise in post-Handelian style. Seemingly unaffected by anything that had been composed in Vienna during the previous few decades, it reflected the late-18th-century English taste for glees with slightly preposterous quasi- or pseudo-classical texts. The evening's only novelty, it received what seemed to me the only truly heartfelt applause—as opposed to the cheering that greeted the old favorites that made up the rest of the program.

Among those were the following works, Vivaldi's "Summer," performed ably by Nosky, and the closing choral sequence from *Messiah*. As in the Bach motet, one could not fail to be impressed by the technical achievement in the Vivaldi, even if this performance seemed intended above all to outdo others in both speed and the calculated perversity of certain solo passages, as when Vivaldi depicts various birds and then the "lament of the peasant" (oddly played without any audible basso continuo, just the bare solo violin and cello). This was another anachronistically high-powered performance; concertos such as this were conceived as chamber music for smaller forces. But the H & H strings conclusively demonstrated here that they don't need a histrionic conductor to perform with flawless precision; Nosky could lead the ensemble with equally eye-catching gestures.

Was I the only one to sense any incongruity as this display of virtuosity gave way to what was meant to celebrate the central tenet of Christianity ("Worthy is the Lamb that was slain")? Both the Vivaldi and the final Handel selections received a reception more fitting for a last-inning grand slam. This must bode well for H & H's ongoing fundraising campaign, which was marketed unashamedly throughout the evening. Yet I wonder whether H & H will ever again be the innovative, cutting-edge musical force that it was within recent memory. Although its players use what still pass for period instruments, performances such as this one are not "historically informed," and this season's upcoming programs reveal nothing innovative. In a bicentennial year that coincides with the tercentenaries of two major composers, Gluck and C. P. E. Bach, H & H is offering no significant music by either, instead focusing on war horses.

On the other hand, with a virtuoso conductor leading sixty or seventy musicians, H & H has in some ways returned to its nineteenth-century origins, albeit without the Victorian expressivity. The band includes violins equipped with gut strings, so-called natural brass instruments, and woodwinds made of real wood. Yet the current performance approach would actually be more historically appropriate for Brahms than for Bach and Handel, if only there were some genuinely Romantic dynamic shaping of lines and expressive flexibility of tempo.

Perhaps we will hear something like that when H & H presents Mendelssohn's *Elijah* this spring. Those attending the reception got a preview of the latter when Alyson Greer led the Young Women's Chamber Chorus in "Lift mine eyes" from Mendelssohn's oratorio, leading one listener to observe audibly (and rightly) that this was done "very sweetly." Genuinely Romantic performances of Romantic music are now more rare than historically informed Baroque or Classical ones. Is it time for H & H leave the latter to specialist organizations that are more committed to creative "period" performance?

“Newish Music for Oldish Instruments,” Juventas New Music ensemble (Sept. 19, 2014)

Juventas New Music Ensemble performed Friday night in a program at First Church in Cambridge that bore the title “Emerge: New Music and Its Origins.” A chamber orchestra of strings and percussion was joined by viola da gambist Andrew Arceci and flutists Carol Wincenc and Su Lian Tan; Lidiya Yankovskaya conducted. The program will be repeated tonight.

I had not previously heard Juventas, whose stated mission is to perform “innovative new music by young, emerging composers.” Friday night’s concert was skillfully executed, but I would not describe the selections as particularly innovative, and I didn’t understand the significance of the program’s title, for nothing that I heard invoked “origins” for me. None of this is necessarily a reflection on the quality of the music, only on the packaging. One of the five works performed did involve an older instrument, a seven-string Baroque viola da gamba, and another imitated the sounds of the erhu, pipa, and perhaps other Asian instruments. But I’m not sure that the latter are any more “original” than the essentially nineteenth-century Western instruments that provided the bulk of what we heard.

Most of the five pieces were of the neo-something variety popular today with both audiences and younger composers looking for acceptance by listeners and players. Although not unskillfully written for the most part, they were more accessible than challenging. That this music could not have been written anytime but in the present is clear from the free use of dissonant passages of various sorts and the occasional unconventional or “extended” performance techniques. Yet all five composers frequently relax into tonal-sounding harmonies or the so-called pandiatonic writing familiar from mid-twentieth-century neo-Classical music. Frequent use of motile ostinatos might be a legacy of Stravinsky, but more often it seems an echo of the more recent minimalist music of Philipp Glass, or of commercial pop or film music.

Each of the five works was roughly ten minutes long, making for a rather short program. The first work, “Ozark Dance” by Scott Etan Feiner, comprises four brief movements for string quartet. Led ably by violinist Olga Patramanskaya, the players succeeded in conveying the composer’s intended effect of blending bluegrass idioms with classic quartet writing. The seventeen-year-old composer handles the ensemble deftly and is not afraid to write lots of notes, creating impressively busy textures. An occasional rhythmic squareness is perhaps a reflection of the underlying folk style, which prevails in all but the third movement. The latter is presumably the funeral march mentioned in the all-too-brief program note (the movements were not listed in the program itself). This slow movement is doubtless deeply felt, yet the effect of the opening cello solo might have been deeper if the latter had been developed rather than giving way rather soon to lush string chords, an easier sort of writing.

Feiner is evidently from New York (the notes were vague about this), but the next three works were by locally active composers. The Brooklyn-born violist Jonathan Blumhofer is now teaching at Clark University in Worcester; his “Semper Dowland, Semper Dolens” for string orchestra, composed last year, also received its premiere. Its title (“Always Dowland, always dolorous”), borrowed from one of the pavans in John Dowland’s *Lachrimae or Seven Tears*, did not prepare me for the very motoric opening, more reminiscent of Bernard Herrmann’s title music for *Psycho* (though not as dissonant) than anything by the Elizabethan composer. I didn’t recognize “shards of the lachrymae” in this first half of the piece, but that was because I didn’t realize that what the composer meant was that he was quoting from another Dowland work, the dance song “If my complaints” (also known as Piper’s Galliard).

The latter also provided the basis for much of the second portion of the work, which begins with a very slow, imaginatively scored passage for a high, sustained solo violin. This is accompanied by quiet

chords played without vibrato (like gambas?) by the rest of the ensemble. This made for an effective contrast with the opening, and it was a nice stroke to close the piece with a brief reminiscence of this. But most of the second half consisted of long neo-tonal passages that struck me again as relatively easy to write, if obviously expressive of elegiac feeling.

Very different were the four "miniatures for two flutes," as the composer describes them, that make up Mary Montgomery Koppel's "Summer Palette." Completed this year, this work, too, was receiving its first performance, by Carol Wincenc and Su Lian Tan. The latter, who teaches at Middlebury College in Vermont, prefaced the performance by noting that Koppel, now at Boston University and a founding member of the Lorelei Ensemble, studied with Tan and wrote the piece for the two players.

Short but not quite epigrammatic, the four movements bear evocative titles ("Dandelion," "Sky Blue," "Scarlet," and "Midnight"), although I didn't always detect an obvious connection between the latter and the music. They are, however, knowledgably composed for two flutes, making imaginative use of contrasts between consonant sustained writing for the two instruments playing in parallel lines, and more contrapuntal passages in which one flute typically takes off on a freer trajectory of its own. As one would expect, the two players gave a strong, assured performance, particularly in the third movement, whose clever scoring in the resonant space of First Church made it sound as if more than two flutes were playing (nowhere in this concert was I aware of the acoustic problems that can baffle performances of earlier music in this space).

The largest (and oldest) work on the program was "Autumn Lute Song," Tan's own 1995 composition for flute and strings. Wincenc, who recorded the work two years ago with Juventas, gave a solid performance of the solo part. This represents what the composer describes as the voice, juxtaposed against the "giant lute" represented by the orchestra. Presumably this is the Chinese lute or pipa, not the European (originally Arab) one, for the string orchestra frequently imitates other Asian instruments as well, such as the erhu, just as the flute seems to refer to Chinese folksong. I thought, however, that I also heard various types of twentieth-century orchestral writing as well, particularly in a dramatic passage that leads to a flute cadenza, which was played lyrically by Wincenc. As the strings reenter, they play slowly and quietly, accompaning little points of sound for the flute. That this quiet passage brings the work to an end is an imaginative and affecting surprise.

The New York-based Arceci was soloist in the closing work, his own "Suite II in G Minor" for viola da gamba, string orchestra, and percussion (chiefly timpani, played energetically by Matt Sharrock). This was described as a "Neo-Baroque work," but it is not at all in the manner of mid-twentieth-century efforts that might so described. Rather the soloist tends to play traditional-sounding licks reminiscent of French Baroque music. These alternate with decidedly un-Baroque drum strokes and brooding Wagnerian unison melodic fragments from the strings.

I could not tell whether the various brief episodes constituted separate movements or a connected narrative (again no movements were listed in the program). I do not think I was alone, moreover, in finding the end of the piece something of a surprise: a series of dour unisons for the strings accompanied by loud drum rolls, followed by silence, sounded like a cue for an unpleasant movie villain, but nothing followed. It was a strange and somewhat anti-climactic way to end the evening.

“Bass Sounds and More,” unaccompanied cello music by Bach and others (Aug. 1, 2014)

Emily Davidson gave the third and final presentation of “Bass Sounds,” a recital on unaccompanied cello, Thursday night at Emmanuel Church’s Lindsey Chapel in Boston. The final program in this summer’s concert series sponsored by the Society for Historically Informed Performance (SoHIP), it was heard previously on Tuesday in Weston and on Wednesday in Andover. The performances featured J. S. Bach’s Second Suite in D minor together with works by one younger and two older contemporaries.

Preceding the Bach suite on the first half of the program were ricercars (one each) by the seventeenth-century Bolognese cellist-composers Domenico Gabrielli and Giovanni Battista degli Antonii. The second half was devoted to four of the eleven *capricci* by Joseph Marie Clément dall’Abaco, son of the better-known Veronese string player and composer Evaristo Felice dall’Abaco. Davidson’s recordings of all these pieces can be heard on two CDs, “Bass Sounds” and “Bass Sounds Evolved,” which can be purchased or downloaded at http://emilyplayscello.bandcamp.com.

Davidson is a fine player in the present-day tradition of Baroque performance. A recital of unaccompanied cello music is potentially either dull or confusing to listeners not fascinated by the instrument or knowledgeable about the music. But Davidson’s playing is clear, successfully projecting the meter even when taking expressive liberties of the type all these pieces demand if they are to be engaging. If there was one persistent problem, it was imprecise intonation. Her eighteenth-century instrument nevertheless sounded very well in the resonant chapel space (at least up front; an electric fan and an open door to the street, necessary here in the summer, probably competed with the cello toward the back of the room).

The two seventeenth-century ricercars were played with plenty of spirit and variety of character from one phrase to the next—almost enough to convince me that they really were meant for cello without harpsichord or organ accompaniment, something that is less certain than generally assumed. Gabrielli—not to be confused with the older Venetian composers Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli (one letter el)—wrote more interesting solo cello parts in his opera arias and trumpet sinfonias than this first ricercar from his set of seven, dated 1689 in their sole manuscript source. The Antonii work, on the other hand, no. 10 from his opus 1 of 1687, is a more extended composition recalling older multisectional *canzoni* by Giovanni Gabrieli, among others. Although not once requiring chordal playing, its phraseology imitates that of a fugue. I wonder whether it could not be performed to project that fact a little more clearly—perhaps by playing the various statements of the theme (which usually lie on different strings) with more distinct colors, or by separating them a little more deliberately from one another, using the type of minuscule phrasing pauses that Davidson employed so effectively in the Bach suite and elsewhere.

The suite was, of course, the main event. Bach’s cello suites are now thought to have possibly originated before the dates 1717–23 given in the program; they have much in common with cello parts in some of the arias from cantatas composed previously, at Weimar. The relatively concise but darkly expressive D-minor suite calls for free yet disciplined performance of its improvisatory prelude. It also demands attention to the expressive shocks and surprises implicit in the jagged melodic lines and dissonant harmonies of the five dances that follow (six if you count both minuets). For me the high points were the expressive sarabande and first minuet, in part because here the numerous chords were played without the “modern” accentuation of the top note (or two) that occasionally intruded elsewhere, preventing the full resonance of the instrument to be heard. The more relaxed ambience of these movements allowed the music to take its own time, something that might be equally effective in

the quicker dances as well.

I doubt I was the only one of the two dozen or so listeners to find dall'Abaco's *capricci* the most interesting portion of the program. Published for the first time less than ten years ago, from a single eighteenth-century manuscript copy, the pieces are not yet well known even to specialists. Davidson made a convincing case for them, choosing a nicely varied selection in intelligently related keys and of diverse characters. Unlike the older *capricci* of Locatelli and the later ones of Paganini for violin, these are well-mannered pieces resembling movements in the sonatas that were being written by the dozen around the middle of the eighteenth century, during what we think of as the transition from Baroque to Classical style. (Although his father was a significant younger contemporary of Corelli, dall'Abaco lived until 1805).

The *capricci* are bland harmonically, yet they are just attractive enough melodically and sufficiently inventive in their use of the instrument to be engaging, despite dall'Abaco's tendency to repeat everything from short phrases to entire sections at least one too many times. Some of these repetitions seem to call out for variations of the type that eighteenth-century musicians routinely improvised. Davidson offered occasional embellishments of her own, but these rather slight pieces could benefit from much more variation—of dynamics and bow strokes as well as notes—particularly when all the indicated repeats are played, as was the case here. Again I found a slow movement (Capriccio 7) most interesting. Here dall'Abaco alludes to his father's style, writing chords that in general were played with good intonation and with attention to their Corelliesque harmony, which alternates between dissonant suspensions and their resolutions.

Capriccio no. 1 (played third) might have gone faster and less freely than it was played here. Perhaps the slow tempo was why only in this piece did Abaco's refusal to say anything less than twice threaten to grow tiresome. On the other hand, Capriccio no. 8, the one example in French style—it is a *chaconne en rondeau* almost such as Rameau might have composed—went rather more quickly than its expressive secondary themes suggested to me. But the main idea proved quite catchy at this speed, bringing the concert and the season to a pleasant conclusion.

Once again SoHIP deserves thanks and congratulations for giving us the opportunity to hear rare repertory imaginatively programmed by emerging artists. I do wonder, however, whether the "historically informed" part of the name could be more more than a fancy substitute for the now unfashionable adjective "period" or "authentic." At this program the audience was given very little information, historical or otherwise, about the music or its performance, and I am not sure that all the information offered was entirely accurate. (One embarrassing mistake was caught in time; the composer of the *capricci* had been confused with his father, whose name appears on the CD track-list.)

More important, for anyone aware of the history of the cello and cello playing, the repertory heard on this program raises a burning question: for what instruments, exactly, were these pieces composed, and how were they held? Davidson played the standard "Baroque" cello of today, but it's become quite clear in recent years that the older Italian composers Gabrielli and degl'Antonii probably wrote for and played somewhat smaller instruments held like a violin or viola. The younger dall'Abaco, on the other hand, lived into an era when many cellists were using endpins, as they do today, rather than cradling them between the legs.

It would wonderful to see more performances that are genuinely "informed" by current historical thinking, which contemplates things that are often quite different from what is still taught and applied in practice by many musicians, including early-music specialists. The notion of a single "Baroque"

style of music or version of an instrument is one of those things. There is nothing wrong with playing music such as we heard Thursday night on one instrument, if that is how the player performs it best. But it would be exciting and illuminating to hear performances informed by current thought, challenging familiar ideas of this music by presenting the older works, for example, on a cello held on the arm (it's hard to believe this is possible until you see paintings, which are not rare, showing big stringed instruments played in this manner).

There was, of course, a time not so long ago when just seeing and hearing a menagerie of recorders or a "chorus" of four singers was all one needed in order to be excited, or provoked. But we still have much to discover about early music, and even about not so early music. I hope that SoHIP will continue to help listeners and performers do just that.

“Bach Choral Works for Organist’s Guild,” music by J.S. and C.P.E. Bach (June 25, 2014)

Bach Choral Works for Organists

I have never seen the church of St. Paul's Parish in Cambridge as full as it was Tuesday night for the first of two performances of a short all-Bach program by the Handel and Haydn Society's Period Instrument Orchestra and Chorus. This was one of a number of concerts sponsored this week by the American Guild of Organists, a large organization of musicians which is holding its annual meeting in Boston. The 7:30 performance that I heard was repeated at 9. The concert was directed by John Finney, with eight familiar local voices heard as soloists.

All-Bach, but not all the same Bach: Johann Sebastian's motet *Komm, Jesu, komm* and his G-major Mass (BWV 236) were preceded by a short choral work “Spiega, Ammonia fortunata” by his second son Carl Philipp Emanuel. The little-known latter work was part of the observance of C. P. E.'s three hundredth birthday on March 8 earlier this year.

The evening's major and concluding work was the Mass—a so-called Lutheran mass or *missa brevis* comprising Kyrie and Gloria, arranged by Bach late in his career from previously composed movements in his church cantatas. Thus the opening “Kyrie” movement is a choral fugue from Cantata 179, whose second aria was also the source of the “Quoniam.” These two movements are understated, though far from unremarkable. The “Kyrie,” in particular, contains some tortuous melodic and harmonic passages; a chromatic line originally used to set the German phrase *falsche Herzen* (“false hearts”) is repurposed for the Latin, or rather Greek, prayer *eleison* (“have mercy”). On the other hand, Bach derived the opening and closing movements of the Gloria from two of the more lively opening choruses in his cantatas, one of them another fugue (from Cantata 17). Hence this is a particularly good work for showing off a virtuoso chorus, even if that was not its original intention.

The performers did their usual excellent work, and I was impressed by Finney's expressive phrasing of the “Kyrie.” Soprano Teresa Wakim and alto Douglas Dodson were a crystal-clear duo in the “Domine Deus,” and Bradford Gleim accurately executed the bass coloratura in the “Gratias agimus.” If the latter seemed occasionally more dutiful than flowing, it could be because of the sometimes ungrateful nature of Bach's adaptation of the Latin text to what was originally a German aria. The expressive high point of the evening was surely the “Quoniam,” in which Jonas Budris was joined by oboist Stephen Hammer in what is effectively a duet. Both parts, full of Bach's ornately embellished melodic lines, were executed beautifully despite a few intonation glitches from the otherwise solid basso continuo group (I'm not sure that two cellos and a double bass were all needed in this particular number, which otherwise lacks strings).

Unfortunately, the combination of a very resonant hall with anachronistically large performing forces made for less than optimal results in the quicker choral movements. Although the ensemble of seventeen expert singers is small by modern standards, Bach probably intended this music, like most of his choral works, for performance with a single voice on a part. Thus the opening soprano-alto duet in the “Gloria” was not for two modern choral sections but two soloists, singing lines played by two horns in the movement's original version in Cantata 79. Performing this as Bach envisioned it might have preserved that soloistic character. More seriously, although the soprano and bass lines were always clearly audible, the equally expressive inner parts for alto, tenor, and sometimes the viola and other instruments were often obscured by the haze of echoing sound. This was a particular problem given the quite rapid tempo taken in what, in another space, might have been a magnificent closing “Amen” fugue.

The same problem emerged occasionally in the motet, an eight-part work for double chorus. This was performed with a single cello doubling each of the bass parts but otherwise no instruments, apart from the small continuo organ (played unobtrusively by Michael Beattie). The lighter scoring alleviated some of the potential acoustic problems. But I still found it hard to make out much of the intricate part-writing, and the German text was largely lost, at least where I was sitting, despite Finney's sensitive direction.

The evening's novelty was the work by C. P. E. Bach, which dates from 1770. It was recently published for the first time, as part of the new edition of the composer's complete works emanating from the offices of the Packard Humanities Institute in Cambridge. Its Italian text, "Spiega, Ammonia fortunata," is a celebration not of chemistry but of the city of Hamburg ("Hammonia" in Latin); you can read more about it in the online supplement to my forthcoming book on the composer.

This luxuriantly scored work, with flutes, horns, trumpets, and timpani joining the oboes, bassoon, and strings heard in the other pieces, made for a grand opening to the concert. Despite the abundant instrumental forces, the work is actually scored quite simply. This allowed it to make a wonderful impression even if the brilliantly played busy lines of the violins (led capably on this occasion by Susanna Ogata) lost some of their articulation in St. Paul's space. Misleadingly described as a cantata, the work is actually a single large choral aria in A-B-A form, the middle section given over to fine soloists drawn from the choir (Margot Rood, Catherine Hedberg, Stefan Reed, and Donald Wilkinson).

The work, which seems to have here received its modern premiere, was written shortly after its composer had received his appointment as director of church music at Hamburg. It contains little of his signature harmonic or rhythmic expressivity, instead relying on formulas from vocal music by his once-popular older contemporaries Graun and Hasse. These formulas nevertheless make a splendid effect when executed as well as H & H did. It would not be contrary to C. P. E. Bach's own spirit and practice to substitute the name "Bostonia" for "Ammonia" the next time they perform it on the other side of the Charles.

“Not-So-Cavalier Consort Music,” 17th-century English works (June 20, 2014)

Not-So-Cavalier Consort Music
David Schulenberg

The Society for Historically Informed Performance (SOHIP) opened its twenty-eighth summer series this week with three performances by the Cavalier Consort, playing English consort music from the mid-seventeenth century. This is not the Virginia-based group founded in 1994 (which seems to be no longer active), but a new assemblage of Boston-based musicians, some of whose names will be familiar to listeners from previous area early-music concerts. I was able to attend the third performance last night at Emmanuel Church's Lindsey Chapel; concerts also took place earlier this week in Weston and Andover.

The program included three works for strings and keyboard by William Lawes, two by Matthew Locke, another two by John Jenkins, and one by Christopher Simpson. A short keyboard piece by Christopher Gibbons (son of the better-known Orlando) served as prelude to one of the Locke works.

The group takes its name from the aristocratic royalists who opposed the parliamentary Puritans during England's Civil War and Commonwealth. Of the composers on the program, only William Lawes could himself be called a Cavalier, killed in military action in 1645. The others rather worked for Cavalier patrons or in the churches whose choirs were closed and organs destroyed during the period of Puritan dominance. Today, of course, the word “cavalier” has an ambiguous ring, and although making for a catchy ensemble name it also connotes accurately the alternately decadent and reactionary culture that produced the music in question. (The morally ambivalent position of those who served the Cavaliers is nicely captured in *The Baroque Cycle,* Neal Stephenson's eight-book series of historical science-fiction novels focusing on one Daniel Waterhouse, ex-Puritan natural philosopher and founder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony Institute of Technologickal Arts.)

Although English music from the Elizabethan period and from the time of Purcell has long been popular, compositions from the intevening decades are less familiar. One reason is that the writing for the string instruments becomes more varied and challenging. Another is that the style, although to some degree incorporating the catchy tunes and rhythms that emanated from newly Baroque France and Italy, can also be rather esoteric, laced with idiosyncratic chromaticism, asymmetrical phrasing, and a discreet quirkiness that English composers seem to have favored, doubtless reflecting the preferences of their aristocratic patrons. Although some of this music tends toward a violinistic idiom, the lines usually remain suitable to the less extroverted viol (viola da gamba), the composers frequently leaving the choice of instrument unspecified. Much of this repertory also lacks true basso continuo parts: in place of the improvised figured bass of later Baroque music, many pieces instead include written-out parts for keyboard, lute, or even harp. The result is a fascinating and often deeply expressive style, but one that was intended for quiet contemplation in intimate chamber settings. Performers are still grappling with difficult questions of how to interpret the scores and make them speak in a modern concert setting.

The five Cavaliers successfully communicated the special character of this music to a sparse but enthusiastic audience. The music, written for two to five distinct parts, was played in effectively varied scorings, sometimes with violins and sometimes with treble viols on the upper lines. One or two bass viols and organ or harpsichord provided the lower parts. The organ was a small chamber instrument eminently suited to this repertory. I was not, however, convinced of the effectiveness of the small harpsichord (actually a virginal) for this music, its lovely but quiet sound tending to disappear beneath

the strings—a particular problem when the keyboard had its own written-out melodic line. Nor was I convinced that the sometimes acerbic sounds of the organ, a product of its meantone temperament, were the positive feature they were made out to be in the otherwise illuminating program notes, whose remarks on tuning seem not to reflect an important article by John Koster in the 2012 *Organ Yearbook*.

I was nevertheless impressed by the very fine sonority of the ensemble in the opening “Newark Seidge” (or siege) by Jenkins. This is a pair of extended dance movements which, to judge from their surprising sad endings in the minor mode, must have commemorated the surrender of King Charles I in 1646 and not a royalist victory (as we were told in the notes). As affecting as the end was, however, I might have hoped for more demonstrative playing of the trumpet calls imitated in all parts through most of the piece.

Something similar could be said of a number of other performances on the program. Possibly it was the Chapel acoustic, perhaps the short bows and off-the-shoulder playing of the violins (as in old-time country fiddling), maybe a certain stiffness or “notey-ness” in the execution of the written-out ornamentation, that prevented the livelier pieces from being as engaging as they might have been. Some of the quieter pieces, too, especially the two so-called fantasia-suites by Lawes, could have benefited from more purposeful or rhetorical shaping, with greater communication between the players. Certain cadences seemed to need more thought; the irregular phrasing of these pieces requires careful parsing, and although a sudden ending can be effective, there is a danger of leaving the impression that the music has simply stopped.

I hasten to add, however, that these problems, also minor, also affect performances of this music by more established ensembles. The final number, from Lawes's famous Royal Consort, achieved some powerful moments under the assured playing of Emily Dahl on the top violin part. James Williamson, performing on a very sonorous bass gamba, imparted real life and beauty to a number of pieces, especially a “set” for two bass viols (without keyboard) by Locke, in which he was joined capably by David Hunt. Even when I felt that the extraordinary harmonies of some pieces, such as Locke's E-minor “set” from the Little Consort, did not receive their full due, I was nevertheless glad for the opportunity to hear this music in a live performance. I certainly look forward to hearing what these players, all clearly thoughtful and deeply involved in this music, will make of it in future performances. They deserve continuing support, and I hope to hear them again in further engagements.

“Cuckoo Captured by Blue Heron,” concert, lecture by Thomas Forrest Kelley (Feb. 25, 2014)

What was billed as a special multimedia event, “Capturing Music: Writing and Singing Music in the Middle Ages,” took place Sunday afternoon at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational. The music in question was chiefly a chanted alleluia for Easter Sunday, in versions from the centuries on either side of 1000, sung by the vocal ensemble Blue Heron under the direction of Scott Metcalfe. Their performances illustrated a lecture by Thomas Forrest Kelly, the Morton B. Knafel Professor of Music at Harvard; among the event's sponsors was the Harvard Department of Music.

Blue Heron seems to be unusually busy this season, having just performed last week both in concert and in their role as de facto resident early-music ensemble at Boston University. As explained on their website (http://blueheronchoir.org/concerts/capturing-music/), Sunday's event was a preview of Kelly's forthcoming book-cum-CD of the same title (it has been announced for publication later this year by W. W. Norton). To judge from Sunday's presentation, the book is likely to live up to its advertised description on the publisher's website as “an entertaining history of how musicians learned to record music for all time.” Given Blue Heron's long association with Harvard, their collaboration with Kelly on the project comes as no surprise, though Sunday's performance was no less beautiful and polished for that.

The media at Sunday's presentation were not particularly multi: apart from Blue Heron themselves, just a standard computer and video projector. But the color photos from numerous medieval manuscripts, displayed on a screen set up at the front of the church sanctuary, were well chosen and beautifully detailed, if possibly too small for many in the audience to see clearly.

Kelly is a terrific lecturer, and at moments I felt as if I was in school again, experiencing a type of teaching that, unfortunately, is more common in films than in reality, and which is frowned upon by educators who underestimate students' capacity to learn from something that is not interactive or simplistically entertaining. Kelly is lively and infectiously enthusiastic about his subject, even when, as in this case, it is one that is potentially quite dry: the beginnings of musical notation in western Europe. This topic, although one of the hoariest in musicology, is far from settled in all details. While Kelly stuck close to traditional subject matter and examples, specialists will have appreciated his personal takes and reinterpretations of various issues. (For instance, he points out that the earliest notation was concerned with musical lines or “gestures,” not individual notes, and he questions the notion of the so-called substitute clausula, preferring to see examples of the latter as keys to the rhythm of motets whose notation did not yet indicate the durations of most notes.)

Although the ancient Greeks had a form of musical notation, they used it rarely, and by the early middle ages it had been completely forgotten in western Europe. Thus the monks whose job descriptions included singing what we call Gregorian chant had to memorize it until the re-invention of notation around 800 or 900. (The date and place are somewhat controversial, and throughout the event Kelly avoided giving dates or pinning developments to particular places.)

Kelly focused on three crucial developments, starting with the invention of graphic signs to suggest the general shape of a melody—what makes it beautiful, rather than its individual notes or pitches. The latter came to be fixed in notation only at a second stage, to be followed by the specification of durations or rhythms for those notes. Blue Heron sang examples of music representing each of those developments, beginning with the chanted introit “Ad te levavi” for the first Sunday in Advent—the first text in many medieval chant books—and the Alleluia “Pascha nostrum” for Easter Mass.

These were sung beautifully and imaginatively. Most musicians today think of chant as simple, but it poses many questions, both interpretive and technical. Who shall sing it? how many singers? all male? Where shall they stand? how to direct it? Beyond these fundamental questions comes the more substantial one of what sort of rhythm and phrasing to use in music whose notation indicates neither.

Metcalfe's solution, at least in presenting these examples of early notated chant, was to use seven male singers, not counting himself; he stands facing the others, discreetly conducting. The chants in question belong to two of the more florid types in the repertory, and Metcalfe had them sung in a somehwat more lively fashion than one usually hears. This allowed embellishments within the melodies to be sung as such, rather than simply intoned with the same unchanging weight as other notes. The latter became the practice by the fourteenth or fifteenth century, and the group demonstrated this as well, as an illustration of subsequent practice, which was beautiful in its own familiar way but far less engaging or expressive.

Rhythmically, Metcalfe's approach is distinct from both the Romantic but somewhat amorphous style pioneered in the early twentieth century by the monks of Solesmes and the heavily metrical, almost dancelike approach made familiar to many listeners in the US by R. John Blackley and Schola Antiqua beginning in the 1970s. Recent years have seen various groups tending toward one or the other of these extremes, but I have heard few performances as convincing or as well thought out as these. Characteristic of Blue Heron's chant is a tendency to move quickly at the heart of a melismatic phrase, then to relax as it reaches a cadence, sometimes leaving a substantial silence before moving on. This gives the music a beautiful, expressive shape, and it must be the product of much rehearsal and careful listening to one another by the singers. You can't fake this; lacking harmony, chant leaves no room for error, and this was sung with perfect ensemble.

Of course, we have no idea whether this was what one heard historically. Certainly most medieval churches and monasteries could not have heard such beautiful singing, but, as Kelly suggested through comments made at various points, what we were hearing was not merely functional service music. This was music sung by specialists for the elite, becoming even more so when monks in the great cathedrals of Paris and other centers began adding harmony to chant.

Kelly's second step in the development of notation, the fixing of pitches, was illustrated by the hymn “Ut queant laxis.” A very different (and less interesting) type of music when compared to the two opening chants, this made little musical impression. But it is fitting to include the hymn in presentations such as this, as it was the source of those famous syllables ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la, used for singing scales (“ut” was later replaced by “do,” which, as Kelly observed, made possible “Do, a deer” in the *Sound of Music*).

Musically the high points of the afternoon were the examples of two- and three-part polyphony or organum constructed upon the Alleluia “Pascha nostrum.” Like chant, organum raises problems that scholars and performers have addressed in various ways, particularly in the two-part variety attributed to the Parisian musician Leonin. Here Jason McStoots sang Leonin's upper line, with several others doubling on the notes of the original chant melody, now stretched out to many times their original duration. This too was done beautifully, the upper part executed with much the same freedom as the chant, but with greater flexibility and virtuosity than one hears in less successful efforts to make sense of this music. This performance left no doubt that, as arcane as two-part organum or its notation may be, this is exciting stuff when executed with imagination.

I felt similarly about the three-part setting of the same alleluia ascribed to the follower of Leonin

known as Perotin. This is an immensely lengthy re-imagining of the original chant, now with two lively upper parts—in this performance each doubled by two singers—intertwining kaleidoscopically. Here Kelly suggested a parallel to the American minimalism of the late twentieth century, and there is perhaps a common focus on simple repeated patterns, not to mention the extended time frame in which both types of music take place. But hearing this music performed in a great space, rather than through loudspeakers or headphones, I was struck by the incessant variety, the absence of simple patterning, in Perotin's counterpoint. No doubt this variety was deepened by the acute sensitivity of both singers and director to the sounds they were producing and to the changing rhythms of the three parts.

I would have been glad to hear more of that music. But because this was, after all, a lecture, Kelly continued to the third step in his history of notation, which was illustrated by somewhat later sorts of medieval polyphony. The sustained nature of chant and organum makes it taxing to sing, and both he and the singers may have lost some of their energy by the time they had to deal with the clausula and the motet. But I sensed no fatigue in the performance of the final selection, the 13th-century English song "Sumer is icumen in." This had little to do, stylistically or in the subject matter of its text, with what had preceded it. But it is an old favorite, and its echoing cuckoo calls made for a lively ending to a beautifully conceived demonstration not only of music history but of how to teach it.

Handel and Haydn Society: Haydn and Beethoven (Jan. 25, 2014)

Two and a half symphonies, with an overture
David Schulenberg

Guest conductor Richard Egarr led the Handel and Haydn Society's Period Instrument Orchestra at Symphony Hall last night in a program curtailed due to the withdrawal of the principal soloist, yet quite satisfying nevertheless. Two major symphonies written about a decade apart, plus a very minor one probably from the same period, were to have been heard alongside Haydn's Trumpet Concerto, played by English superstar Alison Balsom. Her illness, announced several days before the concert, led to the substitution of Beethoven's Overture to *Coriolan*, a shorter piece but one that perhaps led to a more balanced program.

Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, one of his least familiar tragedies, was the basis for a Napoleonic-Era adaptation by the Austrian dramatist Heinrich Joseph von Collin. Beethoven's 1807 overture for Collin's play is a dark, intensely dramatic piece allied in style with the Fifth Symphony, which is in the same key and was his next orchestral composition. The overture followed by just one year the Fourth Symphony, which Beethoven premiered on the same Vienna concert, and which also closed last night's concert. Both works are, then, masterpieces of Beethoven's Middle Period, in which he turned away from the manner of his earlier compositions, which to us sound Haydnesque or Mozartean but were probably closer in inspiration to music by Hummel and others now regarded as early Romantics.

Hence the Beethoven works are quite distant in style from Haydn's Symphony no. 104, which was the other major piece on the program. Haydn's last symphony, composed in 1795, it is arguably not the finest or most original of the twelve such works that he wrote for his two famous London concert series. Yet it does seem to be played more frequently these days than others from those sets, such as the "Miracle" (no. 96) or the Symphony in B-flat (no. 98), which includes a piano solo. It might, however, have made for an interesting pairing with the Trumpet Concerto, composed the following year and just about Haydn's final orchestral work.

The last time I heard Richard Egarr with H & H, in 2011, they performed Beethoven's Fifth (I missed his Seventh Symphony last spring). On that occasion, Egarr directed from the fortepiano, appropriately so if only because the program also included a Haydn keyboard concerto, with himself as soloist. Last night, however, Egarr chose to conduct in the modern or rather later nineteenth-century fashion. In fact it is difficult to imagine a work as complex and difficult as the Fourth Symphony being led successfully in historical fashion, jointly by pianist and concertmaster. It seems precisely the type of revolutionary composition familiar from twentieth-century experience, in which performance problems arise that cannot be satisfactorily solved using the practices of its own time. Yet that cannot have been true of the earlier works on the program, and I did miss the subtle effect that a fortepiano can add to the bass line, especially in slow or quiet passages even in Haydn's late works.

Be that as it may, Egarr played his role as conductor with great energy, leading without a baton but with occasional audible stamping of the floor, beginning with the opening beat of the *Coriolan* overture. This received a gutsy performance, with precision work not only from the violins but the violas and cellos—impressive not least for having been put together on short notice. Alas, despite Egarr's plea to the audience to cough elsewhere, the overture's dramatically quiet ending was marred by some extraneous sounds in the hall—though not so badly as the minuet of the Haydn. There, a sneeze timed to take place during a pregnant silence elicted a sotto voce "Bless you" from the conductor.

One concern during both the Beethoven overture and the Haydn symphony, which followed, was that the ferocious energy occasionally seemed to produce the slightest rushing, especially at pauses or in the split seconds between phrases. At such moments, even the slightest impatience can weaken the drama of passages that otherwise might gain in intensity from a controlled push forward. Was it again impatience, or rather the economics of presenting a somewhat long-than-usual program, that led to the skipping of repeats in the outer movements of the Haydn? This deprived us of hearing a little joke when the Finale turns back to the beginning, in a little four-bar passage that got omitted.

It was, in any case, very welcome to hear some expressive pauses and rubatos at several points in the last two movements of the Haydn. Still, I'm not sure we needed it twice in the Finale, and the familiar Romantic gesture of drawing out the first two notes of the theme in the Trio seems to have gotten out of hand, even though oboist Stephen Hammer played it beautifully.

More problematical was the occasional sense that the players were focusing a bit too much on accurately hammering out each beat, rather than blending their notes with one another or into longer lines. Doubtless contributing to this were the lively tempos taken even in slow movements. The Finale, for instance, is marked *Spiritoso*; rarely used by Haydn, the term does not necessarily imply great speed. I wondered what the movement would sound like if one understood it as a transformation of the gentle old musette. That French dance was inspired by the pastoral bagpipe, represented by a drone played throughout the movement by the cellos and horns (the latter, incidentally, sounded wonderful, here and elsewhere). Even the Andante seemed just a bit rushed, perhaps not because of the actual tempo but rather the strong articulation of every beat. That said, the Haydn received a solid performance, with impressive playing especially by principal flutist Christopher Krueger in the last movement, which is practically a flute concerto.

Beethoven's Fourth is perhaps the least often heard of his symphonies. It is certainly not the delicacy that Schumann took it to be. But its combination of good humor and profound mystery, already articulated in the slow introduction, is less immediately accessible than the explicit heroism or tragedy of other Middle Period works. This performance focused more on the humor, although the Adagio had some beautiful moments. This movement is hard to bring off; its very busy accompaniment and its melodic filligree, both recalling the decorative character of slow movements in some of Beethoven's early piano sonatas, tend to distract from sense of a long, sustained line, although the latter was ably projected in Anthony Pay's clarinet solos.

Beethoven's tempo mark for the final movement is *Allegro ma non troppo* (Not Too Fast), which would be ambiguous had he not later specified a metronome marking. This performance, like most today, was about fifty percent quicker than Beethoven later indicated. His metronome markings are controversial, but even more than the Haydn Finale, this is a movement that I would like someday to hear Not Too Fast. Years ago, Pierre Boulez directed a now rare but famous recording of Beethoven's Fifth in which he took the first movement well below the usual tempo. The result was neither beautiful nor expressive to most ears, and it was certainly not historically authentic. But it did lay bare the composer's musical ideas, some of which we lose sight of when we hear the music performed according to modern convention.

Perhaps because this Finale is taken to be a big joke, perhaps becase passages in it show up on auditions as a test for orchestral players, conductors tend to take it Too Fast. Even in an accurate performance, doing so turns many of the intricate chromatic lines into a blur. This performance was, on the whole, technically secure, but at this speed I think that some some passages were simply beyond the capacity of any musician to render both accurately and musically. Of course, this makes it exciting, and

audiences love it. Certainly Beethoven was a pioneer in writing music whose effect simply cannot be achieved without pushing players a bit beyond their capacity. But I wonder whether the demonic effect of this movement would not be even more intense if played as Beethoven indicated it to be. A period instrument orchestra ought at least to try that, even at the risk of emulating Boulez.

The minor work on the program, which opened the second half, was a short three-movement Sinfonia in G by Wilhelm Friedrich Ernst Bach, grandson of Johann Sebastian and the last musician of the family. The composer's father was Johann Christoph Friedrich, least known of Sebastian's four composer sons. But WFE studied with two of his uncles, Johann Christian and Carl Philipp Emanuel, and the latter probably had something to do with his obtaining a position at the Prussian royal court.

I don't know on what basis WFE's work is claimed to date from the 1780s. Based on its remoteness from the styles of both JC and CPE (and from that of his own father), I would guess that it is later. Unfortunately, it is in a rather generic Classical style, flirting with the early Romantic. It occasionally sounds like late Haydn or even early Schubert, but without much distinctiveness or originality. Egarr prefaced the performance by describing it as "very, very, very delightful music," which I'm sure it was meant to be. But if one is looking for Bach novelties, this composer's Christopher Columbus cantata, or any of his father's symphonies, might have been more interesting, if not also more delightful.

“C.P.E. Bach Turns Three Hundred” (Jan. 20, 2014)

[This was not a review but one of two feature stories I wrote for birthday years of sons of Bach.]

Musical anniversaries provide a convenient way of recognizing and reflecting on composers who may or may not receive the attention due them at other times. This year is the three hundredth after the birth of two major figures in European music: Christoph Willibald Gluck and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. Both German speakers and recognized today as major figures in the period between the Baroque and Classical eras of music history, they otherwise had little in common, personally or musically. C.P.E. Bach’s birthday comes first, on March 8, and in anticipation of that it is fitting to consider his life and works and to preview some related musical events coming up in the area.

Today we think of the Bach sons as fairly minor figures, but during their own time C.P.E. Bach, or Emanuel as I will call him, was far better known than his father. The “Berlin” or “Hamburg” Bach was famous not only for his keyboard playing and for his keyboard sonatas and concertos, but for songs (lieder), chamber music, and, during the latter part of his long career, several oratorios and related works. Although most of these passed into obscurity within a few decades of his death, he continued to be known for his *Essay on the True Manner of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, a two-volume manual that Beethoven and even Brahms studied; today it is an important source of information on historical performance practice. Haydn and Mozart both doubtless read it; they certainly knew Emanuel’s music. Mozart performed his Resurrection Cantata *(Die Auferstehung)* at Vienna in 1788; before that, Gluck had directed a performance of *The Israelites in the Desert*.

Emanuel’s active career was longer than Haydn’s; we have dated pieces from as early as 1731, when he was seventeen, to as late as 1788, the year of his death at seventy-four. In an era when professions were handed down from parent to child, the extended Bach family was the largest and most accomplished musical family in Europe. Six generations provided dozens of towns, cities, churches, and aristocratic courts with organists and composers (and even a few painters), not merely in central and northern Germany but in Sweden, Italy, and England. Johann Sebastian Bach was of course the greatest member of the family, but almost as extraordinary as his own accomplishment is the fact that five of his sons became significant musicians. Four were composers, and two, born two decades apart, were among the most important European musicians of their respective generations.

Johann Christian Bach, the youngest son, was born only in 1735—three years after Haydn. But Emanuel already belonged to a post-Baroque age today known variously as the *galant*, the *rococo*, or the pre-Classical. I had occasion to write in these pages four years ago about the oldest Bachson, Wilhelm Friedemann, who wrote some extraordinary music but puzzlingly failed to meet the high expectations that some, at least, have held for him. Four years after his birth in Weimar, Carl Philipp Emanuel was born in the same town, which already in 1714 was a significant cultural center. He would prove far more productive and materially far more successful than his older brother.

We know essentially nothing about Emanuel’s early childhood. His mother, Maria Barbara Bach, died in 1720, three years after the family had moved to Cöthen. But years later Emanuel would note that her father Johann Michael Bach had been one of the most important of the earlier composers in the family. Emanuel’s godfather was also important: Georg Philipp Telemann, from whom he took his second name, was at the time the most prominent and influential German composer of his father’s generation.

Although Emanuel reported that his father was his sole teacher, he modeled his style more on Telemann’s than that of J. S. Bach. His father must have encouraged him in this respect, knowing that

his own music was increasingly outmoded due to its unfashionable reliance of counterpoint. Nevertheless, as a student at Leipzig, where the family moved in 1723, Emanuel absorbed his father's mastery of expressive chromatic harmony and modulation, as well as his sensitive treatment of German poetry in both sacred and secular music. These things would all be important in his own works, although from this early period we have only a few keyboard pieces and chamber sonatas, one concerto, and a recently discovered church cantata.

By the age of twenty, when he left home for university studies at Frankfurt-on-the-Oder, Emanuel was a fully fledged professional musician. At Frankfurt, although pursuing a program in law, he directed a collegium musicum, thereby coming to the attention of members of the Prussian aristocracy (many of whom studied there as well). By 1741 he was named chamber musician to the newly crowned King Frederick II, known as "the Great." As a member of Frederick's court at Berlin and Potsdam, Emanuel merged his already distinctive style with that of his older musical colleaguess: Quantz, the Graun brothers, and King Frederick himself, who was an accomplished flute player and probably the best amateur composer who has also happened to be a head of state. Emanuel served him until 1767, accompanying him in his famous palace concerts and participating in numerous other musical events in Berlin, which only during this period became a major European capital, politically as well as culturally.

At Berlin Bach made his name as a composer and player of instrumental music. Yet in 1768 he left for Hamburg, the great seaport city on Germany's northwest coast. There he spent his last twenty years as cantor and director of music in the city's churches, succeeding his godfather Telemann in those positions. Like Telemann—and also like Handel, born in Hamburg and active in not-so-distant London until 1759—Emanuel also offered oratorios and other large vocal works in numerous public concerts. Sometimes, again like Handel, he played keyboard concertos before or between the acts. Today we think of Emanuel as primarily a composer of instrumental music, yet for much his career he was probably best known for his songs and sacred works. His father had been chiefly a composer of vocal music, and it is possible that Emanuel saw himself this way as well. After all, his career roughly paralleled his father's, taking him from a position at a secular court to that of a city music director responsible for church music.

Emanuel's works number roughly a thousand. Some three hundred of these are for keyboard instruments: harpsichord, clavichord, fortepiano, and even organ (though unlike his father he left very little for the latter instrument). About half of these compositions are sonatas, but he also left many smaller pieces. These include character pieces that serve as musical portraits of his Berlin acquaintances (and possibly himself), as well as teaching pieces published in conjunction with his *Essay.* Not all these compositions are equally impressive; some were unabashedly commercial in purpose. But players have always singled out the twelve relatively early sonatas dedicated to King Frederick of Prussia and Duke Carl Eugen of Württemberg—the "Prussian" and "Württemberg" Sonatas, respectively—as well as eighteen sonatas published late in life in six collections "for *Kenner und Liebhaber*"—experts as well as amateurs, as Emanuel put it on the title page. Those collections also included a number of rondos and fantasias that are as remarkable for their witty harmonic and rhythmic surprises as for their sometimes profound expression. The same combination of humor and expressivity occurs in dozens of other less well-known pieces, many of them unpublished during Emanuel's own life and still rarely played.

Instrumentalists are often surprised to learn that songs for voice and keyboard make up the second most numerous category of Emanuel's compositions. He was, however, the leading figure in the history of the eighteenth-century German lied, a friend of major poets whose works he set to music throughout his career. Particularly beautiful, if unfashionable today, are his fifty-four settings composed in a

sudden creative outburst in 1758 on texts by Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, whose sacred verses also inspired Quantz, Haydn, and even Beethoven. Later, at Hamburg, he produced annual passion oratorios and other service music. Yet the work that he considered his real masterpiece was the Resurrection Cantata, an oratorio-size setting of a poem by Ramler that had been previously composed by Telemann, among others.

Throughout his life Emanuel also wrote and performed works for various instrumental ensembles. These furnished repertory for concerts both public and private, during a time when something like the modern concert tradition was emerging in the major cities of Europe. Fifty-two concertos for his own instrument, the keyboard, are most important among these. But there are also versions of some of these concertos for flute, oboe, and cello, and he left as well several dozen sonatas for either one or two treble instruments plus basso continuo. Many of the trio sonatas allow alternative instrumentation; thus, in the metaphorical debate depicted in the famous Program Trio, the two characters "Melancholicus" and "Sanguineus" can be represented either by two violins or by one violin and a keyboard player (who also plays the bass line).

Inevitably, C. P. E. Bach will receive the most extensive recognition this year in his native Germany. Notable events are scheduled to take place in Weimar and in the four cities where he spent his career. Here in Boston, the major performing institutions seem to have taken little notice of him (or of Gluck). Yet Boston, or more precisely Cambridge, is second only to Berlin as a center of research and publication relating to the composer. Since 2005, the Packard Humanities Institute has been issuing a new edition of the composer's collected works. With offices in Cambridge, the edition is affiliated with Harvard University, whose libraries contain a remarkable number of eighteenth-century books, images, and musical manuscripts relevant to Emanuel Bach (disclosure: I have contributed to three volumes published in the edition, and an article of mine on C. P. E. Bach is in the current issue of the *Harvard Library Bulletin*).

Those curious about Emanuel Bach will want to visit the Houghton Library and the Loeb Music Library at Harvard, both of which are currently displaying exhibitions of items relating to the composer. These will remain on view through April 5 (website here). Highlights of the Houghton exhibit include the widely reproduced engraved portrait of the composer by Johann Heinrich Lips, seen here in its original state as an illustration in a curious volume of *Physiognomic Fragments* by Johann Caspar Lavater. There is also a manuscript score of a cantata by W. F. Bach that Emanuel performed at Hamburg, as well as a recently re-discovered letter written by Emanuel to the artist Adam Friedrich Oeser, who taught Emanuel's son before the latter's early death (this letter, from Yale, is one of the few non-Harvard items in the show).

At the Music Library, one can see the first edition of Emanuel's *Heilig* for double chorus and orchestra, a masterpiece of eighteenth-century music printing on huge sheets showing twenty-eight staves per page, as well as original editions of the *Essay* and the accompanying keyboard pieces. Recorded music piped into the Houghton Library's Edison and Newman Room did not seem to be identified anywhere, but while I was there it included works whose first editions were on display at the two locations, including the *Heilig* and the Sinfonia for strings in E minor that the composer Hasse declared the best he had ever heard.

Many of these items are available online, at imslp.org and on the Music Library's own website. But seeing them in sometimes blurry electronic scans provides little sense of the physical texture or many details of the actual objects. Anyone curious about how a reliable modern edition of music is created will, moreover, want to study the display in the Loeb Music Library. This details the production process

for several different types of composition that have already appeared in the new edition.

A search for upcoming local performances of C. P. E. Bach's music thus far reveals surprisingly little, but doubtless more will be announced. At least one has already taken place this year: last Thursday, as part of an opening reception for the exhibition at Harvard's Houghton Library, soprano Amanda Forsythe and Harvard University organist Edward Jones gave a short recital of Emanuel's songs (lieder). These were sung with exceptionally pure intonation and elegant phrasing. But what really impressed me was the strong characterization and drama that Forsythe infused into even a seemingly light song such as "Die Küsse" (The kiss). The miniature cantata "Selma" became a fully fledged operatic scena; Emanuel also wrote an orchestral version, but Jones's accompaniment (on harpsichord) was sufficiently colorful and impeccably played.

February 1 and 2 will see performances by A Far Cry of Emanuel's Sinfonia in B-flat for strings, W. 182/2. (Emanuel's works are most often identified by "W" numbers from the thematic catalog published in 1905 by Alfred Wotquenne; "H" numbers from a 1989 listing by E. Eugene Helm are usually reserved for works missed by Wotquenne.) This sinfonia is from a set of six such works composed in 1773; the one in B-flat is arguably the least unconventional of the bunch. It is therefore disappointing that this same work, and not, for example, the extraordinary B-minor sinfonia, will be repeated April 4 and 6 by the Handel and Haydn Society's Period Instrument Orchestra.

Mezzo-soprano Pamela Dellal will sing a selection of Emanuel's songs and cantatas on February 25 at Boston Conservatory. She will be joined on that occasion by Peter Sykes, playing Emanuel's favorite keyboard instrument, the clavichord. Sykes just happens to be president of the Boston Clavichord Society, which will be sponsoring a number of C.P.E. Bach–related works this year, listed here (disclosure no. 2: I am the Society's vice-president).
The last weekend in March will see several Emanuel Bach events in Cambridge. On March 28 the Harvard University Choir and Baroque Chamber Orchestra will present the composer's oratorio *The Israelites in the Desert*, preceded that afternoon by a symposium featuring Christopher Hogwood and the work's most recent editor, Reginald Sanders, among others (details here). The following evening, at the Friends Meeting House, Sykes will be joined by Dana Maiben in a concert featuring Emanuel's remarkable B-Minor Violin Sonata (W. 76), among other works. The same program will continue with mezzo-soprano Julia Cavallaro performing songs of Emanuel Bach with fortepianist Sylvia Berry.

Emanuel's music can be baffling when first heard, especially if one expects to hear anything like that of his father—or like that of his younger contemporaries Haydn and Mozart. His best known works, including some of those programmed on the above-mentioned concerts, are by turns witty and passionate, virtuosic and tender. But those who make an effort to get to know more of his music will find that, as his English contemporary Charles Burney wrote of his clavichord playing, "he possesses every style; though he chiefly confines himself to the expressive."

A Far Cry and Urbanity Dance: dances to music of Bach and Stravinsky (Jan. 12, 2014)

A Far Cry, Boston's conductorless chamber orchestra, teamed up with Urbanity Dance to present a program entitled "Chemistry" Saturday night at New England Conservatory's Jordan Hall. The short program—roughly an hour of music—comprised just two works: *Dancing With Bach*, a set of transcriptions by composer Eric Nathan; and Stravinsky's *Apollon musagète*. Both were choreographed by Betsi Graves, founder and director of the Boston-based Urbanity.

As Graham Wright observed, previewing the performance on WBUR's Radio Boston (you can hear it here: http://radioboston.wbur.org/2014/01/10/artery-chemistry), it is unusual these days for a relatively small contemporary dance company to perform with live orchestral accompaniment. Actually, "accompaniment" was interviewer Anthony Brooks's word, and it would be difficult to say that either group accompanied the other. This was a true collaboration, although I'm not sure that "Chemistry" adequately characterizes what we heard and saw. The program's unusually successful integration of dance and music was a product of its inventive staging and choreography. But surely "good chemistry" occurs between performers, and between performers and audience, in any effective production.

Jordan Hall is not much of a dance theater, but the bare stage and the spare but effective lighting and costume were sufficient to create a memorable dance environment, thanks to the clever juxtaposition of dancers and players. For both works, the nineteen players or "Criers," as they call themselves, mostly stood toward the rear of the stage but occasionally walked about, their movements part of the choreography (the two or three cellists and bassists sat as usual—no marching cello à la Woody Allen's *Take the Money and Run*). The dancers, as many as sixteen of them in the final movement, occasionally stepped, jumped, and crawled around and between the players, some of whom who were required at one point to fall backwards into the arms of a supporting dancer—this while continuing to play the violin or viola, an act requiring considerable concentration, not to mention the type of physical trust that members of a dance company place in one another.

From a technical standpoint this was a most impressive production, and I could not say I heard a single musical glitch that could be attributed to either the choreographic machinations or the absence of a conductor. A Far Cry is hardly the first orchestral ensemble to perform without a baton-waving director, of course. Such was the norm until the early nineteenth century, and since 1972 the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, based in New York, has been performing in this fashion. Their programming, however, tends to be somewhat more mainstream. A number of the Criers are routinely involved in both early and new music, and although they perform on conventional "modern" instruments, the products of their wide-ranging experience are evident in both their repertory and their interpretations.

The first work comprised six dances each set to one or two keyboard compositions by J. S. Bach. These were arranged for strings by American composer Eric Nathan, who is currently a composition Fellow of the American Academy in Rome. Commissioned by Michael Sporn—the program was dedicated to the memory of his late wife Catherine—these are fairly conventional arrangements, avoiding the extended string techniques and atonal harmony that can be heard, for example, in Nathan's quartets *Multitude, Solitude* and *Omaggio a Gesualdo* (available on his website at http://www.ericnathanmusic.com/Listen.html).

The choices and ordering of the Bach pieces are surprising: six gavottes, plus a courante with two variations, all framed by two non-dance movements. The first of these, the Capriccio from the Second Partita, is originally a closing movement. But it started the program off with a bang, the Criers executing Bach's lively fugue with virtuoso panache. The gavottes were played with similar precision.

The gavotte was originally a rather gentle French Baroque dance, but Bach's examples tend to be livelier and more energetic. The fairly aggressive "modern" approach taken by A Far Cry was therefore not entirely inapt, and it softened in the musettes that alternate with the gavottes from the Third and Sixth English Suites. The second of these was played elegantly by violinist Jesse Irons, alongside choreography in which the soloist struck poses that reminded me of those famous pictures of Nijinksy dancing *Afternoon of a Faun*—appropriate, perhaps, in a dance inspired by a pastoral type of bagpipe. Equally charming was the melody of Gavotte II from the B-Minor Partita, assigned to bassist Erik Higgins in one of arranger Nathan's rare instances of quirky but still entirely effective scoring.

Only Courante II from the First English Suite struck me as less than satisfactory, from a musical point of view. It is not one of Bach's more engaging dances to begin with, and the metronomic performance gave the running figuration of the two variations or doubles a stiff, driven character. On the other hand, the concluding number, the Andante from the Sonata BWV 964, was played very beautifully. Taken from Bach's own keyboard arrangement of his Third Violin Solo, it received a lush instrumentation from Nathan, with particularly lovely solo playing from cellist Michael Unterman, who doubtless enjoyed the opportunity to play a line originally composed for violin.

Although using "modern" instruments, neither this performance nor Nathan's arrangements could have been imagined twenty or thirty years ago, before the widespread adoption of historical performance techniques. The lovely, nearly vibrato-free sound of the first musette (Gavotte II from the Third English Suite) is something that mainstream players have had to learn from early music specialists. Clearly, however, it was a deliberate choice on the part of choreographer Graves not to incorporate any references to Baroque dance—at least none that I could recognize. Her choreography could easily be described as eclectic, mixing elements from traditions ranging from classical ballet to modern and jazz dance. Often she takes what might be called a sculptural approach to arranging dancers onstage, as in the work of a group such as Pilobulus.

More impressive than the architecture of individual dancers or small groups, however, is the contrapuntal character of Graves's choreography, which, reflecting that of the Bach works, might involve half a dozen distinct sorts of attitudes and movements occurring simultaneously across the stage. Humorous touches, including vaguely gestural wiggles of head, hands, or limbs, amused the spectators and were by and large in keeping with the witty character of Bach's music. Yet, at least in the slow final number, the constant activity, inventive though it always was, might have been relieved by something a little less busy or restless.

Polyphony and repose, two potentially contradictory tendencies, are both characteristic of Stravinsky's 1927 ballet *Apollon musagète* (Apollo, leader of the muses). Arguably the most classic of the composer's neo-classic works, it is scored for string orchestra, with an important part for solo violin. Its instrumentation is therefore perfect for A Far Cry. The composer's score suggests using 34 players, but nothing was lacking in this performance by barely half that number.

Far more than the Bach dances, this is a work that presents pitfalls for a conductorless ensemble, thanks to its numerous changes of tempo and frequent syncopated rhythms. I heard nothing amiss, however, and I suspect that being onstage with the dancers helped the musicians keep together both with the latter and with one another. Conductorless does not mean leaderless, and much credit for holding things together is surely due to the principal first violinist, who eloquently executed the solo violin part, representing the god Apollo. I *think* this was played by Omar Guey, but the hierarchy-free approach taken by A Far Cry extends to the printed concert program. This, although imaginatively designed, with some striking black-and-white images, avoids identifying individual players (or dancers) in particular

numbers.

Anyone staging this work does so in the wake of George Balanchine, whose choreography for the first European performance in 1928 remains in the repertory of many companies, a defining classic of modern dance. Graves's version features four soloists, just as Stravinsky and Balanchine envisioned the work. But in place of one male dancer (Apollo) and three female Muses, we have one woman and three men, joined in the concluding number by the rest of the company. The work as conceived by Stravinsky, although opening with the Birth of Apollo and concluding with an Apotheosis, merely hints at a story line or narrative. Whether the inversion of gender roles was meant to signify anything was unclear, but I don't think this matters.

Certainly this was a virtuoso demonstration of inventive responses to Stravinsky's music. It included a comical solo for Terpsichore and some very artful arrangements of the two dancers in the latter's duet with Apollo—which also included a game of hide-and-seek as the two slithered around the musicians in the cute middle section of this *pas de deux.* Only in the final number did I sense disharmony between dance and music. It was clever to have all the dancers, and most of the musicians, swirling slowly about the stage in symmetrically intertwining figures. Yet the Apotheosis emerged in this performance as an anticlimax after the blackout at the end of the preceding Coda section. Sonically the end was as beautiful as anything, but crowding the stage in this manner struck me as the antithesis of Stravinsky's gradual paring down of the texture to a sublime simplicity—though perhaps this was the intention.

Canto Armonico: choral works by Biber and others (Dec. 21, 2013)

Harmonious Choral Singing from Canto Armonico
David Schulenberg

Canto Armonico, the local choral group founded in 2000, was directed last night by Simon Carrington in a program built around selections from the 1693 Vespers of Heinrich Biber. They were joined at Boston's First Lutheran Church by a small instrumental ensemble led by violinist Dorian Komanoff Bandy. Joyce Painter Rice provided a preview of the performance earlier this week (you can read it here).

Canto Armonico is, according to its website, "unique among Boston choruses in remaining an educational group: students learn from their more established peers." The performance proved to be a demonstration of polished choral singing and direction, but it did betray its academic origin in the manner of its presentation, with various soloists stepping forth from the body of nineteen singers, and in the impression it gave of well-coached young musicians who in some cases seem fairly new to this repertory.

The sanctuary of First Lutheran is a fine concert space, but it is only a fraction of the size of the Salzburg Cathedral depicted in the image that adorned the concert's program booklet (you can see it here). The famous 1682 engraving by Melchior Küsel aptly represented the program's theme, "Imperial Splendor at Salzburg Cathedral." But unlike the massive "Missa salisburgensis" attributed to Biber, whose performance has been connected with Küsel's engraving, the works heard Friday night call for a far smaller ensemble—one that was better served by the available space, even if it meant forgoing the grand polychoral music promised by the picture.

The program of sacred music for voices and strings was organized much like the liturgical reconstructions that became fashionable a decade or two ago, roughly following the order of service of a festive vespers celebrated in the Habsburg empire—especially in the crown lands of Austria, Hungary, and Bohemia—during the late seventeenth century. The main events included five psalm settings by the Bohemian composer Biber, best known today for his violin music but also composer of many vocal works. After the psalms came a hymn, a Magnificat, and another hymn; following seventeenth-century Catholic practice, most of these items were preceded by other compositions that stood in for the chanted antiphons, which would have been sung at those points in an ordinary vespers service.

The psalms and Magnificat were from Biber's *Versperae longiores ac breviores*, a collection of both "longer" and "shorter" psalms and other vespers music published in 1693. Two of the antiphon substitutions were provided by instrumental pieces also by Biber; one hymn was by the Austrian emperor Leopold I, Biber's sovereign, who was the most talented of several seventeenth-century monarchs who dabbled in composition. Two other items were by Biber's German contemporary Ruprecht (or Rupert) Ignaz Mayr, and a third was by the Venetian composer Giovanni Legrenzi, who belonged to the previous generation but perhaps was meant to represent the Italian tradition on which Biber and his Austrian contemporaries drew. Two organ toccatas by Georg Muffat, Biber's colleague at Salzburg Cathedral, completed the program.
I've gone into some detail on the organization of the program because I'm not sure how clear it was to hundred or so in attendance. Neither the list of pieces in the printed program nor the rather generic notes by Brian Clark, editor of Biber's *Vesperae*, adequately identified all of the 14 individual compositions that were heard. And because the performance was done without breaks or applause,

those who were not carefully following the Latin texts, and matching them with the list of pieces, could well have missed the points where, for instance, one psalm ended and another began.

I've complained previously about performers who insist on making listeners withhold applause until the end of a program. A discrete gesture by director Carrington silenced a few bold souls who attempted to applaud the opening number. Although Clark's notes explained that this was "not a strict reconstruction of a particular historical event," I wonder if I was the only member of the audience who at times felt that we were being made to sit diligently through a demonstration of good choral singing, without being allowed to express our enthusiasm for it until the end.

The high points of this program did lie in the choral movements. I was particularly impressed by the beautiful opening stanza of Emperor Leopold's "Ave maris stella" and by the precise execution of Biber's lively "Laudate Dominum" (Ps. 117), as well as the equally energetic performance of the opening lines of his "Laudate pueri" (Ps. 113). There were also exciting moments in Biber's Magnificat, especially at "Fecit potentiam."

Unfortunately, none of this is actually choral music in the modern sense. Rather, as Biber's original title page and printed parts make quite clear, it is for vocal quartet with optional "ripieno" singers, that is, just four additional voices. As in countless other Baroque works, including Bach's cantatas, the light scoring of the voices reflects that of the instruments, which here are limited to five or six strings and continuo. Rescoring chamber music for a larger ensemble naturally makes for a more impressive sound, but there are losses as well, even when conducted as sensitively and sung as well as on Friday night.

The most serious problems in this music come from the repertory itself, which comprises functional service music. Habsburg church pieces can suffer from a certain sameness, and in these late works the violinist Biber's imagination for vocal writing rarely matches that revealed in his earlier instrumental music. A counter-Reformation aesthetic favoring clear presentation of the words lives on in this music, which, however, tends to lack the vivid pictorial effects and textural variety characteristic of earlier Baroque writing, such as the famous 1610 Vespers of Monteverdi.

In more grandly scored works, such as Biber's Vespers of 1674 for thirty-two vocal and instrumental parts, the "imperial splendor" alluded to in the program title can be a pleasant distraction from what is sometimes a fairly workaday demonstration of Baroque musical rhetoric. Confident soloists experienced in this repertory can bring rhetorical force or elegance, as appropriate, to the occasionally stiff or ungrateful vocal lines. But otherwise the construction of the music out of little fragments, dutifully setting forth one line of text at a time, can grow wearying.

Carrington's solution is to use dynamics, tempo, and all the other resources of a good modern choral director to bring out such contrast as one can find in this music. All in all, it worked on Friday night—but I was always conscious of being present at an artfully shaped choral performance. This was especially true in the doxology at the end of Leopold's hymn, where I'm afraid that the over-emphatic jig rhythm merely revealed to me the amateur composer's lack of subtlety. The lively final verse and closing doxology of Biber's Magnificat, with its catchy triple meter, displayed the choir's virtuosity, eliciting appreciative exclamations from the audience, but it struck me as just a hair too fast, attracting attention to itself *as* display.

Of the various solo quartets heard during the evening, the strongest was that in Biber's Magnificant, in which I was particularly struck by Stephanie Kacoyanis's rich alto voice and Ian Pomerantz's emphatic

bass. Claire Raphaelson was the capable soprano soloist in Mayr's "Sancte Maria," a work whose vivid writing stood out from the rest of the program. The little-known composer evidently continued to cultivate the rhetorical urgency that one hears in earlier seventeenth-century sacred works by Italian composers such as Monteverdi and Strozzi.

The vocal numbers were accompanied ably by the ensemble of two violins, two violas, viola da gamba, and violone, although the violin obbligatos were sometimes less audible than they might have been with a smaller choral complement. On the other hand, they occasionally over-balanced the solo singing. Catherine Liddell was the reliable continuo theorbist.

Two instrumental pieces by Biber, both early works, demonstrated the composer's inventive writing for strings. Unfortunately, Sonata III for six strings and continuo from the composer's 1676 collection seemed insufficiently rehearsed, and its remarkable succession of sharply contrasting sections remained a patchwork, although individual sections, including a fugue for the four lower parts and some blazing passagework for the two violins, were effective.

The fifteen Mystery or Rosary Sonatas are difficult to bring off in live performance on account of their scordatura: the re-tuning of the violin to produce otherwise unobtainable sonorities. Leader Bandy did a creditable job with the second work from the set, which depicts the Visitation (Mary's journey to see Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist). But this is not one of Biber's most engaging compositions, and Bandy's legato approach seemed to forestall the more incisive sound or rhythm that might have energized the piece, especially in its one dance movement, an allemande.

Muffat's two toccatas were cleanly played by Bálint Karosi, organist of First Lutheran, although they would have made more of an impression on the church's splendid Richards, Fowkes organ. Here they were played on the same little portative instrument on which Karosi furnished a continuo accompaniment for the rest of the program. The pedal (bass) notes lacking on the instrument were supplied by David Miller on the violone, a stopgap that proved surprisingly unobtrusive.

Still, it was strange that the program ended with one of Muffat's toccatas. Muffat is an important composer, but it was difficult to focus on Karosi's performance of Toccata II, played with considerable sublety on the small instrument, while the entire choral ensemble remained standing after singing Legrenzi's "Alma redemptoris Mater." It was equally odd that Legrenzi's work, which lacks string parts, should have closed the vocal portion of the program (nor was its transparent Venetian texture particularly well served by choral performance). I also wondered about the decision to use, even here, Germanic pronunciation of the Latin text, which in its original performances was likely sung by Italian soloists, at Salzburg or Vienna as well as in Venice.

I was nevertheless grateful for the opportunity to hear some rarely performed music, imaginatively programmed. Canto Armonico will have fulfilled its purpose if some of its members go on to explore further the repertory from which these pieces were drawn.

Tallis Scholars: works of Victoria and others (Dec. 15, 2013)

The Tallis Scholars at Forty

A nearly full house braved oncoming snow Saturday night to hear The Tallis Scholars, directed by Peter Phillips, in a concert of "Renaissance Music for the Holiday Season" at St. Paul Church in Harvard Square. A favorite with audiences worldwide, the vocal group, comprising ten singers and conductor, presented a program centered on music by the Spanish composer Tomás Luis de Victoria but extending to a work by the Austrian Romantic Bruckner. Motets by another Spaniard, Francisco Guerrero, and the French composer Philippe Verdelot filled out the program. The group, whose name refers to the English Renaissance composer Thomas Tallis, has always specialized in early music while performing and commissioning occasional new works as well.

The concert was part of the Boston Early Music Festival's 2013–14 concert season. In remarks that preceded the second half of the concert, Kathleen Fay, executive director of BEMF, proudly related that the Tallis Scholars, now in its fortieth year, had performed for BEMF annually since the establishment of the organization's concert series in 1989 (25 years in all, counting an initial season in which BEMF was a co-sponsor). Fay then read a proclamation by outgoing Boston mayor Thomas Menino declaring December 14, 2013, "Tallis Scholars Day" by virtue of the group's long relationship to the city. It was gratifying to hear this explicit and official recognition of the importance of music to Boston's culture and economy. (The question of whether TS Day was also to be observed in Cambridge, where the event actually took place, was not addressed.)

A pre-concert conversation between Phillips and Boston College music professor Michael Noone similarly focused on the group's commercial success, which Phillips attributed in part to their early exploitation of the new medium of the CD audio recording. Curiously, much of the conversation echoed points made in David Weininger's article about the Tallis Scholar's in yesterday's *Boston Globe*. Unconsidered in either discussion were the underlying reasons for the popularity of the group, which, as Phillips related, filled St. Paul's Cathedral in London for a performance earlier this year, not to mention venues across Europe and North America, as well as in Australia and New Zealand.

Clearly, however, the Tallis Scholars' success with audiences is not merely the product of effective marketing. This listener was impressed more than usual by the sheer sound of the group. Perhaps it was only due to the exceptionally fine seat offered a reviewer, but I had the impression that the group's present incarnation, which includes quite a few younger singers, performs more strongly, in terms of both volume and diction, than I recall from concerts of years past. And although it has always been hard to find significant technical faults in the Tallis Scholars' performances, this one struck me as even more polished than usual. It betrayed no sign of coming near the end of a year that will, by Phillips's reckoning, have included no fewer than 99 performances—and, presumably, almost as many plane trips, many of them across oceans.

Singing is a physically demanding activity, and the sheer stamina of the group (and its director) would be remarkable even if it was not also accompanied by exceptional musicality. Emblematic of the latter was the unfailingly beautiful phrasing at cadences. Where lesser choirs tend to cheat the final note of a phrase, clipping it in the hurry to breathe or to get on to the next passage, the Tallis Scholars, singing as one, make the type of infinitesimal relaxation that eloquently rounds off the concluding sentence or paragraph, and which distinguishes a routine performance from a finished one.

Many in the audience, to judge from overheard conversations, are aficionados of Renaissance choral

music if not active singers of it. Still, I sensed that the most spontaneous, unbridled applause was for the two most easily accessible numbers on the program: Bruckner's "Ave Maria" and a setting of Blake's "The Lamb" (1982) by John Tavener, sung as an encore in memory of the recently deceased composer. I say this as no reflection on either performers or listeners, for both works were sung impeccably. The Tavener was particularly beautiful, both its tonal and its non-tonal or dissonant harmonies being sung with touching purity.

But I suspect, in view of the enthusiastic applause and acclamations at the end of the concert, that many failed to notice that this was an understated and somewhat puzzling program. Despite the titular reference to holiday music, the selections included nothing for the Christmas season, having been composed originally for occasions ranging from Easter to the Siege of Florence. The program notes pointed to the Marian associations of some of the works, but only three were actually addressed to the Virgin (a fourth involved Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary," usually identified as Mary Cleophas).

The major work on the program, Victoria's Missa Gaudeamus, is not frequently performed, probably because of its unusual structure: it is a so-called paraphrase mass, based on an earlier motet by Cristóbal de Morales, but it is also to some degree a cantus firmus mass of a somewhat peculiar sort. A single phrase of Gregorian chant, from the introit "Gaudeamus omnes," is repeated over and over in each of the mass's five movements, which thus become, in effect, contrapuntal variations on the recurring melody.

The use of these archaic techniques gives the music a quality rather different from the almost Baroque clarity and expressive rhetoric that make other works of the composer so popular with modern audiences. This mass therefore calls for concentrated listening, and the absence of any strong contrasts can require patience even when hearing a performance as polished as this one (in an actual mass, of course, the movements would have been separated by various liturgical actions). It was nevertheless thrilling to hear the sustained notes of the cantus firmus in the final "Agnus Dei," soaring above the fray in the second soprano part.

The clear, strong sound of two sopranos doubling on that line is a distinctive trademark of the Tallis Scholars. That it is probably an anachronism—such a part would originally have been sung by a boy or an adult man—is immaterial, given how beautifully it always sounds. Yet the use of that sound not only in this composition of 1576—written by a Spaniard working in Rome—but in music as diverse as the earlier Verdelot motets and Bruckner's Ave Maria does raise interesting questions. Is it, fundamentally, this type of sound, rather than deeper aspects of the music, that so enraptures the Tallis Scholars' audiences?

Phillips explained to Weininger that his founding of the group was in part a reaction to the vibrato-rich massed choral singing that was prevalent forty years ago. The"straight" vocal production employed by the Tallis Scholars, although vapid when poorly executed, can be almost literally piercing when done as well as it is by Phillips's singers and heard up close. Its visceral impact can be harrowingly expressive when, in a work like the Bruckner, it is combined with the type of dynamic inflections that we now associate with the Romantic era.

I heard some of the same as well in the opening work on the program, Victoria's "Dum complerentur." This Pentecost motet comes much closer than the mass to the rhetorical style usually associated with the composer. Here listeners doubtless responded to the expressiveness of the performance, not merely to its basic sound. Yet I sensed the slightest reticence in the applause for the earlier works by Verdelot and Guerrero. In the pre-concert conversation, Phillips described it as his "mission" or "calling" to

reveal such little-known musicians as "great composers." In the case of Verdelot, I can't say that he succeeded, though this is not through any fault of the performance.

Verdelot, when mentioned at all today, is described as one of the inventors of the Italian madrigal. His Marian motet "Beata es," which opened the second half, provided a sharp contrast to the works by Victoria. Verdelot's less predictable polyphony vaguely resembles that of his older contemporary Josquin des Prez; I was glad to hear the contrast here and in his "Sint dicte grates Christo," although the latter did not, to my ears, achieve the drama promised by Phillips's prefatory remarks.

Could this be because the work was not, in fact, written within the Florentine republic while under siege by imperial troops? The *Grove* biography of the composer by H. Colin Slim casts doubt on the idea that Verdelot was actually in the city, which was soon to be restored to its Medici tyrants. Be that as it may, Renaissance composers did not typically express their own thoughts or feelings in music. Phillips invited us to imagine hearing it performed in Florence itself, shortly before the city's capitulation, but for me this type of historicist listening does not make the music itself any more or less moving. If, in any case, the composition indeed contains the "colorful chromaticisms and dramatic harmonic shifts" promised by Alexandra Coghlan's program note, Phillips did not particularly bring them out—though such things are not to be expected in music from as early as the seige years 1529–30.

I was more impressed by the two concluding compositions by Guerrero, an older contemporary of Victoria who flourished at mid-century and, unlike the latter, worked primarily in his native Spain. Perhaps that explains what seemed to me the conservative style of both motets, which lack the anticipations of Baroque tonality and musical rhetoric characteristic of Victoria.

"Usquequo, Domine," a setting of the penitential Psalm 13, is an appropriately solemn work that nevertheless revealed some extraordinary sonorities under Phillips's direction. The final "Maria Magdalene et altera Maria," as Phillips explained, narrates the discovery of the empty tomb by the two Marys, who are then greeted by a vision of the risen Jesus. That this made for a vivid ending to the program was not due to the "scalic embellishments" mentioned in the program notes—a so-called madrigalism that was not a significant part of Guerrero's musical language here. Rather, extraordinary intensity was achieved particularly through a build-up to the beautiful sustaining of the line "Jesum quem quaeritis." Coming at the end of a long program of mostly slow music, its moving execution demonstrated the consummate mastery of both the singers and their director.

Handel and Haydn Society: Handel's *Messiah* (Nov. 30, 2013)

A Polished, if Risk-Free, *Messiah*

Boston's Handel and Haydn Society presented Handel's *Messiah* last night at Symphony Hall, marking their 160th annual offering of the famous oratorio. Harry Christophers led the Society's chorus and period orchestra, joined by soprano Gillian Keith, countertenor Daniel Taylor, tenor Tom Randle, and baritone Sumner Thompson.

When an organization has been performing a work, or portions of it, since 1815, there is naturally a certain element of institutionalization in what they do. But *Messiah*, like Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*—to name the other seasonal favorite for this time of year—has become such a global phenomenon that it is hardly identifiable with any one performer or group. Its performance can be a mere exercise in recreation or nostalgia, or—like the once-ubiquitous *Messiah* sing-ins—primarily a social event, a form of participatory entertainment. The latter is, in fact, what *Messiah* once represented for H & H, which originated at a time when music-making by mixed amateurs and professionals was an approved thrill for the upper classes, a recent import to America from London and other European cities. London, Berlin, and Vienna all have choral societies of a comparable nature, still performing *Messiah* on a regular basis just as H & H does.

In attending this performance, I was particularly interested in seeing and hearing what new things Christophers and H & H might have to offer present-day listeners of *Messiah.* Whether one can, or should, attempt anything original with the work is an open question, given its iconic status. Yet thirty or forty years ago, when period-instrument performances of *Messiah* began to be heard, these proved to be a revelatory experience for many listeners. On one level, what was revealed were sounds that were imagined to be those that Handel himself, and his first audiences, had heard when he was directing charitable performances at London in the 1740s and 1750s. More substantially, the use of valveless trumpets, gut rather than metal-wound strings, and concomitant playing practices led to new interpretations. This was especially true when the period instruments were joined with "period" vocal forces: a smaller chorus than had become customary, and soloists who had some awareness of Baroque approaches to ornamentation and articulation.

We have now, of course, reached a point where H & H's chorus of just 30 professional singers and a somewhat smaller number of players has become a new norm. The four soloists include a countertenor, that is, an adult male falsetto singer. The notes that are sung and played are largely those that Handel actually wrote, shorn of the extra orchestral parts, including horns and clarinets, that were being added even in the late eighteenth century by Mozart and others, leading performances of the already venerated yet invariably updated work.

In fact Handel did not write most of the solo alto numbers for falsetto singers. At least some of his own performances may have used an expanded orchestra that included horns and perhaps flutes or recorders. There was no conductor in the modern sense; players and singers alike relied on aural as well as visual cues to keep together, responding to one another more like modern chamber musicians than orchestral players. The soloists sang as members of the chorus, stepping forward when their times came, and although Handel himself may sometimes have played on a contraption that combined elements of a harpsichord and an organ, no keyboard player was ever asked to jump constantly from one instrument to another (thereby depriving us of the basso continuo at the junctures between certain movements). Handel's singers may not always have performed with unfailing taste, but they would have added trills and other essential ornaments, as well as cadenzas, according to the conventions of the

time and as presupposed by the composer himself. Handel and his listeners would surely have frowned at singers' sudden rocketing into the stratosphere, especially at the ends of arias; this was recognized years ago for the distracting “look-at-me” gesture that it is, but it seems now to be coming back into vogue.

So what we heard last night was a distinctly modern type of performance—and one, I hasten to add, that was by almost anyone's standards more satisfying musically than what might have been heard forty or fifty years ago, in Boston or anywhere else. The chorus was superb, executing the demanding final fugues on “Blessing and honour” and “Amen” with the same crispness and clarity as their initial “And the glory.” The orchestra was equally alert, with only a few insignificant imprecisions marring more than two hours' worth of vivid playing.

Among the high points for this listener was the excellent work by the choral tenors in “For unto us,” especially at the hard-to-enunciate phrase “and the government,” and by both sopranos and tenors in “All we like sheep,” notably on the difficult turns at “we have turn-èd.” Christophers likes to shape choral numbers through a combination of articulation and dynamics, and at times this runs the risk of becoming obtrusive: in the choral fugue “And with his stripes we are healed” the first four words were punched out, the last three sung gently and smoothly. To these ears the result was almost a caricature of Baroque musical rhetoric, but the chorus executed this ably throughout the many repetitions of the subject. In “Glory to God,” Handel's word painting on the line “and peace on earth” can sound banal, but the quiet low unisons for the tenors and basses were executed with the gentlest of ritards, making the phrase genuinely expressive.

Of the soloists, I most enjoyed soprano Keith's often exquisite voice and her fluent accuracy when singing the coloratura that Handel actually wrote for her. Countertenor Taylor sang perhaps as effectively as one can in arias that lie awkwardly low for a falsetto singer; one could share his ebullience on the few original high notes that allowed his voice to shine, but the fact that one can sing a trill on a high E does not mean that it is beautiful or expressive to add one at the end of “Thou art gone up on high.” I confess that I did not care for the many varying vocal colors that Randle brought to the tenor solos, often within a single phrase, although these were certainly sung with conviction. Baritone Thompson likewise projected a forceful persona, yet the coloratura roulades in “Why do the nations rage?” sounded to these ears less clearly than those of the choral basses in the answering “Let us break their bonds.”

To judge from the choice of soloists, Christophers likes full-blooded singing, with plenty of vibrato—rather different from the more austere voices that characterized especially English early-music performance in past decades. Although not exactly a modern “romantic” or operatic sound, this approach to the vocal solos goes hand in hand with Christophers's dynamic shaping of many of the larger numbers. This last was evident right from the start, when the first phrase of the overture was repeated softly, an effective but probably anachronistic touch. The real problem with such an approach, for this listener, lies not in its unhistorical character but in the fact that it can seem imposed arbitrariliy over Handel's often complex polyphony. *Messiah* is actually unusual within the composer's output for what is, on the whole, a relatively simple texture. The latter is famously evident in the choruses that he adapted from previously composed Italian duets. But even in those, such as “For unto us a child is born,” I missed the type of attention that the singers and players of H & H—every one of them a capable soloist—might give to details such as the expressive appoggiatura on the word “born,” were they not subject to a conductor's overarching dynamic design.

I wonder, too, what would happen to the pacing of the work if its division into three “parts,” as they are

called, could be respected. I understand that neither a modern audience nor a presenter has the patience, or the money, for a *Messiah* with two intermissions, like a three-act opera. Yet setting off the opening "Christmas" portion of the work—really more an "Advent" portion, focusing on prophecies from the Hebrew Bible—from the other two rather distorts the point of Jennens's text, which proceeds to sections focusing on sin and then on redemption. Even executed as well as they were last night, the two latter sections invariably grow a bit wearying when performed without a break (a brief pause for applause after "Hallelujah" is hardly sufficient). The last two parts are not helped by the presence of a few numbers that are distinctly less imaginative than others, notably the final soprano solo "If God be for us." There is a reason why this aria is almost never heard in holiday sing-ins or on single-CD *Reader's-Digest* versions of the work.

It is probably pointless to speculate whether such a number would seem more interesting in the hands of musicians freshened by a second intermission, or to an audience enlivened by a second opportunity for refreshments. But doing so does raise the question of whether early performances, perhaps proceeding at a more leisurely pace, might have drawn more out of the details of certain numbers. I wonder, too, whether it is not time for creative directors and presenters to think about rethinking works such as *Messiah,* as they were rethought three or four decades ago as the "historical performance" approach really began to take hold. We've already had creative re-enactments of Mozart's version, using "Classical" rather than "Baroque" instruments. What, however, did H & H's 1876 performance, using Robert Franz's "improvement" of the Mozart version, sound like? A real Romantic-era sort of performance, still with an orchestra of gut strings and wood woodwinds, but with a chorus of hundreds and Rossini-esque vocal embellishments, would be an interesting experiment, at the very least. Or, if that seems too over the top (not to mention hopelessly impractical), how about replicating that 1817 performance of the "Hallelujah" chorus for President Monroe and "many civic and military characters of distinction," as described in H & H's press kit thoughtfully provided to this reviewer?

Of course we look for more in *Messiah* than from the restaging of a historical event. What we heard last night was a very vital, generally very polished modern interpretation. The nearly full house enjoyed it, and the 90% or so who chose to take a seventh-inning stretch during the "Hallelujah" chorus clearly relished the opportunity to participate in that little bit of historical re-enactment (even if George III probably did not, in fact, ever stand at that point in a performance, as duly noted in Teresa Neff's program notes). I don't think that it would be risking this level of audience support if, at some future date, some director of H & H were to take some real artistic risks with Handel's work.

Rebel Baroque Ensemble: works of Handel, Telemann, and others (Nov. 10, 2013)

Rebel Without Much Cause

The Baroque instrumental ensemble Rebel played Sunday afternoon at the Gardner Museum's Calderwood Hall, joined by the "English-German" tenor Rufus Müller. The group's name, which is accented on the second syllable, is that of the French eighteenth-century century composer-violinist Jean-Fery Rebel. Rebel was conductor of the Paris Opera, but although there were several French-influenced pieces on the program, there was little French in its sound or execution. And whereas the name of the group, pronounced as in English, suggests that it aspires toward the unconventional, these ears sensed nothing particularly rebellious in Sunday's performance.

Although billed as a "baroque orchestra," Rebel on this occasion consisted of violinists and co-directors Jörg-Michael Schwarz and Karen Marie Marmer, joined by oboist Meg Owens and just three other string players, alongside keyboardist Dongsok Shin alternating between harpsichord and organ. They offered what should have been an engaging concert, combining familiar works with unfamiliar ones from the later Baroque. Alas, I found this a poorly conceived program, for the most part performed cleanly but without a great deal of imagination.

It was a bad sign at the outset when the audience was asked not to applaud between numbers, as this would disturb the "flow" of what was said to be a carefully constructed program. But the program's title, "Out of the Eclipse: Music of Transformation and Revelation," had little to do with anything on it. This was simply a selection of various sorts of instrumental pieces alternating with arias from cantatas by Telemann and oratorios by Bach and Handel.

There's nothing wrong with that, except, as I've complained on other occasions, it makes it difficult for both listeners and performers to get deeply into the very different sonic and expressive worlds of say, a quirky English chaconne from around 1660 and a Telemann aria from seventy years later. The three Telemann arias, already excerpted from the small-scale cantatas of his *Harmonischer Gottesdienst* and its so-called *Fortsetzung* ("Continuation"), seemed further diminished when scattered about the program instead of being given as one set. It didn't help that no texts or translations were supplied, nor did the otherwise informative program notes by cellist John Moran tell us anything about the subject matter of these, or of the four Handel arias.

I found it especially odd not to be allowed to applaud the soloist in a concerto or an aria. Particularly in an intimate space such as Calderwood, applause, together with its acknowledgement by the performers, is a way of establishing rapport between audience and musicians. Without it, the juxtaposition at the beginning of the program, of the overture to Handel's opera *Agrippina*, in G minor, and Vivaldi's Sinfonia *al Santo Sepolcro* in the remote key of B minor, was grating. Maybe that was intended, but long intervals for tuning after other pieces destroyed any sense of "flow" overall. The English conductor Roger Norrington makes a point of inviting audience members to clap even between movements if they are so inclined. I wouldn't advocate doing this merely because it was the practice at the time this music was composed. But having to suppress the urge to applaud can make one feel as if attending a funeral rather than something fun or exciting.

Besides the pieces mentioned so far, the program included Vivaldi's other *sepolcro* work, a sonata in E-flat (both may have been written for Lenten observances in Vienna). There were also chaconnes by John Blow and Henry Purcell, as well as the latter's Fantasia "on one note." Bach's A-Major Harpsichord Concerto was done in a version for oboe d'amore that was published in 1970 as a putative

reconstruction of Bach's original (the program failed to identify this fully; it is the work of Wilfried Fischer).

The concerto was not the only Bach curiosity on the program, which also included the aria "Zerschmettert mich" from the 1725 version of his St. John Passion (BWV 245b). There the aria is an outburst of remorse following Peter's denial of Christ, which is narrated in a famous recitative; the latter's tortuous melodic line on the words "wept bitterly" is echoed in the present aria. The aria, whose bursts of figuration for the first violin are continually interrupted by passages of expressive arioso, was sung and played as well as anything on the program. But I fear that here, even more than in the Telemann arias, most of the audience had no clue as to what was going on, in the absence of a printed translation. This was a shame, for Müller sang with his usual clarity, instilling some understated drama where appropriate here as in the Handel selections.

Unfortunately, much of this music was written for a genuine Baroque orchestra, with at least doubled violins—not a chamber ensemble. Even the Purcell fantasia, which calls for five parts (not six as indicated in the program), was under-scored; the note C, which is repeated without change throughout the piece, had to be provided by the organ. Playing the part on a string instrument as intended would have allowed it to swell and diminish in response to the other players. Holding the note out on the organ at the end of the piece, after the other players had finished, did make it possible to segue directly from this work into Handel's aria "Tune your harps," from the oratorio *Esther*. I found this more silly than clever, even if the oboe does begin the latter selection on the same note. But at least in this case the absence of applause made it possible to connect two successive selections. In this aria, moreover, the pizzicato strings—representing harps—accompanied the lyrical oboe and tenor in a way that for once sounded really delightful.

In other selections, however, the problem of too-small forces was exacerbated by the extremely dry acoustic of Calderwood Hall. This did little to blend or amplify the sound of the individual instruments, at least where I was sitting. Having both performed in and reviewed concerts when the hall was new, nearly two years ago, I found that my initial enthusiasm for the space was not sustained on this occasion. The hall's in-the-round (or rather in-the-square) design presents difficult challenges for both performers and listeners (for a report on the hall, go to http://www.classical-scene.com/2012/01/11/calderwood-hall-at-isgm/). Müller sang some arias facing one side of the hall, others facing in the opposite direction. This meant that everyone got to see him some of the time. But, particularly when confronted by a solo voice, a listener's experience is surely better when hearing direct rather than reflected sound. I don't think this is merely a matter of psychology, although of course it helps in vocal music to see the singer's face and gestures.
The sound seemed to me only slightly better when I moved upstairs and to the opposite side of the hall, after hearing the first half seated on the floor just behind the harpsichord—which was nevertheless almost inaudible there. Seated farther from the instruments, I thought that they blended together a little better, but not enough to sound like the orchestra needed in some of the pieces. Strangely, however, some passages written for just voice or oboe with basso continuo were over-scored, as the double bass rumbled along together with cello and harpsichord or organ. Bassist Anne Trout has a sure hand and was doubtless playing as lightly as possible, but the result nevertheless sounded heavy, weighing down passages especially in the Telemann arias and the Bach concerto (which, unlike the rest of the program, really are chamber pieces).

A contributing factor may be that Rebel's approach to string (and wind) playing seems a mixture of modern "historically informed" practice with the driven sort of performance that one heard especially in "modern" instrument groups of the 1960s and 1970s. Many pieces suffered from an aggressive and

fairly uniform approach to articulation, with little imagination paid to sound or rhythm, or so it seemed from my vantage points. I was particularly disappointed to hear little response to the extraordinary harmonies in either the French-influenced dances by Blow and Purcell or the Vivaldi sinfonia. Their performances revealed little awareness of the unconventional dissonances and remote modulations of these extraordinary pieces.

By the same token, the two chaconnes only intermittently had any dance character, which was missing also from Handel's aria “Your charms to ruin” (Samson's retort to Delilah). This too is a dance, using the rhythm of the siciliano, a type of slow gigue, but the performance missed the odd mixture of grace and regret that Handel seems to have envisioned for the aria. On the plus side, Rebel's approach gave the first aria, Samson’s “Total eclipse,” as well as the concluding “His mighty arm” (from Jephtha), some of the forcefulness that each requires. Müller nevertheless maintained a light approach to the coloratura in the final aria, which I believe brought the concert to a rousing close—insofar as I could tell, from my seat above and directly behind the singer.

No review would be complete without a few quibbles about the printed program. It's really not right to refer to the Telemann items as, for instance, “aria from Cantata No. 2 in C Minor.” Most cantatas, including this one, are not in a single key, and this is no. 2 only of the set in which it was first published, not of Telemann's cantatas as a whole. Some sort of editing glitch deprived the conscientiously written program notes not only of italics (for titles) but of proper formatting for an interesting block quotation. These may be merely copyeditor concerns, but surely I was not the only member of the audience who wondered why, besides lacking texts for the vocal numbers, the program also failed to provide any information about the two soloists. Not only couldn't we clap for them; we were told nothing about them!

Handel and Haydn Society: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven (Nov. 2, 2013)

Three Old Favorites, Brilliantly Performed

Grant Llewellyn, who served as music director of the Handel and Haydn Society from 2001 to 2006, returned Friday night to open the season, conducting three Classical orchestral works at Boston's Symphony Hall. In his first appearance with H & H since 2008, Llewellyn directed the society's Period Instrument Orchestra in a program of Mozart's "Haffner" Symphony, Haydn's Symphonie Concertante, and Beethoven's Second Symphony. The program will be repeated Sunday at 3.

A nearly full house responded enthusiastically to the evening's offerings, all crowd-pleasers. Although none ranks among its composer's most important or profound works, each gives the orchestra a workout, providing numerous opportunities for both sections and soloists to shine. The orchestra, particularly the strings, rose to the occasion, sounding as well as I can remember it in recent years, with not a single glitch that is worth writing about.

Why, then, was your reviewer not as buoyed by this performance as the great majority of listeners clearly were, energetically applauding these brilliant performances of three bright major-key works? Some readers will doubtless ascribe my reticence to sheer perversity or axe-grinding. I will not deny that for me this concert raised the same questions that I have brought up previously about "period" performance under a modern-style conductor. But my demurral is also a matter of wondering just how much delight a listener can derive from a performance of old favorites that has little new to say about the music. H & H is a venerable and valuable part of our region's cultural establishment, and it serves its musical and educational missions well and seriously. Yet I miss the excitement that one felt at times in the past when old repertory was performed in new ways, or when unfamiliar music was presented in imaginatively programmed concerts.

But first to report on what was actually heard. Mozart's D-major symphony K. 385, known as the "Haffner" after the family friend who commissioned it, is an unusually ebullient and fully scored work. (As noted in the booklet, it is his only symphony to use what would afterward become the standard eight woodwinds, albeit only in the outer movements.) In some respects the work is closer to an opera overture of the time than to a symphony, though the two genres were hardly distinct when Mozart wrote it in 1782.

The strings passed their auditions here, playing with great precision in the quick outer movements, despite the now-customary blazing tempos. Yet I sensed little of the harmonic tension and drama that Mozart creates (even in this generally bright work) by occasional excursions into minor keys or through the chromatic tones—each an opportunity for an expressive accent—that he fits into the melody of the second movement. Why bother, then, to take both repeats of this Andante, which in this performance seemed long even when executed almost quickly?

In the Haydn work, concertmaster Aisslinn Nosky executed the solo violin part with great energy and precision, alongside equally capable contributions by cellist Guy Fishman, oboist Stephen Hammer, and bassoonist Andrew Schwartz, all principals of their respective sections. Horns John Boden and John Aubrey, and trumpets Bruce Hall and Jesse Levine, were at times almost equally soloists in the outer movements, and played as rousingly. Yet energy and precision are not all that this work demands.

Haydn did not bring the same imagination to this piece that he did to his "London" symphonies of the same period (ca. 1792). Yet therefore all the more reason for the soloists to demonstrate some of the

playfulness and interaction that to my ears were lacking in this rendition. Even the recitatives that the solo violinist interjects within the last movement lacked the quasi-operatic drama that Salomon, Haydn's original soloist, would have taken for granted. But instead of milking the pregnant pauses for all they are worth, the re-entrances of the orchestra after the soloist's interjections sometimes seemed slightly rushed, leaving the dialog between soloist and “tutti” understated at best. The same ever-so-slight rushing seemed to afflict the Beethoven as well, with hardly a moment's notice given to the work's sometimes remarkable transitions, particularly in the Larghetto second movement.

I confess that I have not heard the orchestra enough in recent years to be able to judge whether the failure to make more of the music should be laid more at the feet of the conductor or of the players. I would imagine that the avoidance of nuance, the reticence to really sing, is a product of both straight-ahead, unimaginative direction and players' tacit understanding that performance of this sort has become a norm—something that may seem unavoidable in modern concert organizations in which one spends precious little time actually rehearsing, let alone responding to one another musically.

Yet there is nothing either historically “authentic” or musically meaningful in performing this music metronomically, particularly at the breakneck tempos that prevailed Friday night. One unfortunate product of bringing together players to perform under a guest conductor in just a few rehearsals is that the music may tend to be broken into short-winded little phrases, rather than falling into more meaningful sentences and paragraphs. The latter require players who think and feel the music more organically than when they are merely following someone. The players of H & H are uniformly superb musicians, and each understands how to do more than this. Yet I'm not sure how one gets any orchestra, “period” or mainstream, to do otherwise these days. I did appreciate the singing of principal clarinettist Erich Hoeprich in the second and fourth movements of the Beethoven. But all too often the winds seemed to avoid anything resembling a really long line, and all too often the strings seemed merely dutiful.

What would be truly exciting would be to see a return to the spirit of invention and experimentalism that marked the first efforts toward “period” performance of Classical repertory—especially the big-orchestra music of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. I think, for example, of H & H's first “period” instrument performances several decades ago, and those of other bands whose directors abandoned their ego-boosting position on the podium in favor of direction from a harpsichord or fortepiano. It's true that many such performances still suffered from the attempts by the pianist-director to conduct from the keyboard, which was sometimes more a visual prop than an actual sounding part of the ensemble. (Last night's performance completely lacked the fortepiano, which I missed especially in the quieter passages of the Haydn work.)

If one insists on conducting these works in the modern manner, then why not actually interpret the music, as was taken for granted in the later nineteenth century and through most of the twentieth? On the other hand, what would happen if, instead, the director led from the keyboard in collaboration with the leader (the concertmaster), as we know was done by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—at least as long as he retained his hearing? What would happen if the orchestra followed with their ears, creatively—and if a soloist, rather than fitting her arpeggios to the beat of a conductor, led the orchestra with them, and they responded in way that was not merely note-perfect? It may be that actual historical performances were less precise than today's—but we don't expect recording-quality precision from a jazz band, nor did concert-goers before the age of digital recording. What they evidently did expect, and what I think we now lack, is the sort of spontaneity and creativity that is still taken to be a part of jazz (even if that isn't actually always the case).

Modern “period” orchestras such as H & H's have now turned their brand of “historically informed” performance into a routine. But in fact we still have much to learn about how this music was actually performed. And I suspect that there is still much to be made of it creatively and artistically, by experimenting with such things as historical seating arrangements and collaborative rehearsal and direction techniques. There is an element of risk in that, and players and directors would have to leave their comfort zones. So, too, would presenting organizations and their supporters. But I cannot imagine a presenter better prepared to do this sort of thing than H & H, which was once in the forefront of enlivening our cultural scene and broadening our perspective on our musical heritage.

A few closing words on the pre-concert talk by Teresa Neff (who also provided the very fine program notes). Her well-attended lecture was well presented and well documented, illustrated with just the right mix of period pictures and audio examples. I do wish that she had had more to say about the major work on the program—Beethoven's Second—rather than focusing on biographical matter that related more to the relatively minor Mozart and Haydn works. General audiences, especially those with a large proportion of subscribers, always find it easiest to take in stories about composers and their patrons. But the Second Symphony is remarkable less for having been composed when Beethoven was in the throes of a personal crisis than for standing on the cusp of the transition from his so-called Early to his so-called Middle Period. Indeed, it shows an astonishing development over his First Symphony in both formal aspects and the treatment of the orchestra.

Neff began her talk appropriately by quoting Count Waldstein's famous dictum that Beethoven was to “receive the spirit of Mozart from the hands of Haydn.” Waldstein's remark was remarkable for being made at a time when Mozart was still seen as “difficult,” hardly the universally popular composer that he is today. There are occasional darker moments in both the “Haffner” and Beethoven's Second, as well as a great deal of ingenious counterpoint. I don't think it would have spoiled the fun to mention such things, even while making clear that all three composers succeeded in pleasing the crowd with these ever-lively and generally brilliant compositions.

Cambridge Concentus: Handel's *Resurrezione* (Oct. 28, 2013)

Having reported earlier this weekend on a concert of mostly Roman Baroque music performed at Cambridge's First Church, I returned there Sunday afternoon to hear more of the same, albeit by a considerably better-known composer. Cambridge Concentus, directed by guest conductor Kevin Mallon, offered Handel's second oratorio, *La Resurrezione.* First performed at Rome on Easter 1708 during the composer's Italian period, this is a splendid work, if today impossible to produce in anything like its original state. We are taught that oratorios are unstaged sacred dramas, but in fact this work was musically an opera in all but name, originally performed on a special stage with painted scenery in what is now the Palazzo Valentini.

Unlike Handel's more familiar English oratorios, composed thirty and more years later after his move to London, this has an Italian text. There is no chorus, and the librettist Capece treats Mary Magdalen, St. John the Evangelist, and even Satan (Lucifer) in the manner that was standard for Italian opera *circa* 1700: that is, alternating between dialog in recitative and speechifying in the form of virtuoso arias.

Some of the music will be familiar even to those who have never heard the work, for in later years Handel drew on this, as on his other early compositions, for tunes and sometimes whole movements. Thus the closing ensemble at the end of the first half sounds like a mash-up of the bourrée from the *Water Music* and the chorus "For unto us a child is born" from *Messiah.* But in later incarnations of the music Handel toned down its most virtuoso features, particularly the spectacular writing for the baritone who sings Lucifer. And only in select scenes of his later operas and oratorios did Handel so frequently provide solo parts for recorder, viola da gamba, cello. These give the work a special color that, together with the abundant exuberance and freshness of the youthful Handel's early Italianate writing, should make any modern performance a treat.

Alas, with two of the five soloists unable to sing due to illness, and only one of them replaced, what we heard was a severely truncated performance of Handel's work, and it would be unfair to say much more of it. Tenor Jason McStoots was a stylish St. John, Jacob Cooper an appropriately histrionic Lucifer, and Emily Marvosh's rich alto voice brought moments of great beauty to the part of Mary Cleophas. Anney Barrett, with a lovely clear soprano, sang at time charmingly as a last-minute substitute in the part of Mary Magdalen, but Brenna Wells was forced to retire from the central and critical role of the unnamed Angel.

The orchestra is at least an equal of the voices in this work. Cambridge Concentus, although too small and lacking some of the instruments called for by Handel's score—no lute, no second cello, and far fewer than the original forty or so players—acquitted itself very well. I was particularly impressed by Zoe Weiss's performance of the extraordinary viola da gamba part, particularly in the accompaniment during one aria of the sweetly lyrical recorder players Andrea LeBlanc and Kristin Olson (who doubled in other movements on flute and oboe, respectively). Concertmaster Marika Holmqvist, playing a part originally written for Corelli, handled her solos very deftly as well, and cellist Katie Rietman and keyboardist Leon Schelhase furnished a more-than-dependable continuo.
Conductor Kevin Mallon, whose elegant commentary mingled with apologies in spoken remarks before both halves of the work, made the best of what he described modestly as an "unusual" circumstance. One can only hope that he will return soon to Boston in a performance that will more adequately reveal why those who are familiar with his recordings of Baroque theatrical classics are so enthusiastic about his direction.

Viols and Friends: works of Kapsberger, Frescobaldi, et al. (Oct. 26, 2013)

Some Enchanted Evening: At Home With the Barberini

Although Boston concert programs routinely include early works that were once seldom heard, there remain broad swathes of Baroque and older repertory that are little explored by performers. Few listeners are familiar with the music of southern Italy from the period shortly after 1600. This was the focus of last night's concert of “Music for Viols and Friends” at First Church in Cambridge.

The program, which will be repeated Sunday afternoon at the Somerville Museum, reflected the continually inventive programming of plucked-strings specialist Olav Chris Henriksen. Henriksen is known not only for his performances on a broad variety of historical instruments but for his fascinating lecture-demonstrations in the instrument collection of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. In spoken commentary Friday evening, Henriksen pointed out that the program illustrated the work of “pioneers”: Piccinini, the reputed inventor of the archlute; Fontana, one of the first to publish sonatas for the violin; Rognoni, whose book on melodic embellishment represents a “climax of what you can do” when playing the viola da gamba.

During Friday evening's concert Henriksen played theorbo and archlute, two early-Baroque relatives of the guitar. He was joined by Lisa Brooke (violin), Barbara Poeschl-Edrich (harp), and Carol Lewis (viola da gamba). It was particularly gratifying to hear the harp—more specifically, the Italian triple harp. The latter was never widely played, and it is still rarely heard, although it was an important element particularly in Baroque music from southern Italy.

The very substantial program featured no fewer than twenty-five distinct pieces by nine composers, virtuoso toccatas in improvisatory style alternating with lighter dances and the occasional more serious contrapuntal piece. Of the composers, only Frescobaldi is likely to be at all familiar to most concert-goers, and he was represented by works from his little-known Canzoni (1628) and *Arie* (1630). These, however, were well worth hearing, as were, in particular, the selections by Kapsberger, who was to the early-Baroque lute what Frescobaldi was to the organ and harpsichord. Equally significant were rarely played pieces by the Neapolitans Trabaci and Mayone, whose works on the program included some of the earliest published music specifically for the harp.

Perhaps the most impressive performance of the evening was of the long and difficult First Toccata from Kapsberger's 1640 collection of music for the theorbo or chitarrone, one of the two long-necked, many-stringed varieties of lute on which Henriksen played. A magisterial demonstration of the both the expressive and technical possibilities of the theorbo, the toccata received a magisterial performance, dramatically juxtaposing thoughtful, expressive passages with flashes of extraordinary virtuosity, played with great energy and precision. The only possible cause for complaint is that those who require visual stimulation to enjoy such music must have been disappointed by the fact that a music stand obscured the view of the player's right hand.

The harp received an equally challenging workout in Mayone's “Ricercar on the tune by Costanzo Festa”—in fact a long contrapuntal fantasia on the early-Renaissance “Spagna” melody. (The Neapolitans for some reason associated this dance tune with the name of Festa, a Roman composer of the early sixteenth century.) Exquisitely played, this was the most extended example on the program of the serious vocal-style polyphony in which composers of the period demonstrated their technical proficiency—though it also incorporated digital virtuosity as well. This took the form of scales played simultaneously by both hands, producing a contrapuntal texture hardly ever heard in the more familiar

harp music of the nineteenth century.

The latter, of course, was written for a very different instrument. On Poeschl-Edrich's Baroque triple harp, three rows or ranks of strings provide some of the functions that are served by pedals on the modern instrument. During the program, tuning and retuning the many strings on the various instruments necessitated a few extended breaks in the action. But this is an occupational requirement of this repertory, like the re-arranging of the stage between sets in a concert of contemporary music.

Carol Lewis had an opportunity for solo virtuosity in an embellished arrangement by Rognoni of Palestrina's famous madrigal “Vestiva i colli.” Rognoni's demonstration of the art of melodic decoration, published in 1620, was accompanied by harp and lute, playing the original composition of some fifty years earlier. I'm not sure that the combination was entirely successful, as the plucked versions of what were originally vocal lines occasionally clashed with and distracted from the remarkable embellishment of the same lines in the gamba part.

I had a similar impression of a toccata for two instruments by the Bolognese lutenist Alessandro Piccinini, played on harp and theorbo. This piece, too, seemed to combine simple and decorated versions of the same melody. Here I sensed an occasional stiffness in the written-out ornamentation, as also in Frescobaldi's toccata for violin and “spinettina” (here replaced by lute) and his canzona La Franciotta for violin and gamba. Rognoni's virtuoso arranagement was nevertheless played with the freedom and panache that it demands, despite a few intonational glitches in some extraordinary passages that must be played high above the frets. In such pieces the performer's task was is not made easier by the unsparing acoustics of First Church's Lindsay Chapel.

Both Lewis and violinist Brooke shone in Sonata 10 by the Venetian composer Fontana. Published in 1641 some time after his death, the piece represents the same virtuoso improvisatory style as other works on the program. Among these I would single out Sinfonia 4 from Kapsberger's 1615 collection, which opened the program with striking modulations and violin flourishes. I was unconvinced only by a few dances and arias taken from vocal works, especially Luigi Rossi's opera *Il palazzo incantato*, whose early-Baroque *bizzarria* made little sense without the words. Rossi's opera, incidentally, was the source for the program's title, “The Enchanted Palace.” The latter also alluded to the Barberini Palace in Rome, home not only to Pope Urban VIII—whose uncle Francesco Barberini was patron of some of the music heard tonight—but to the so-called Barberini triple harp famously depicted by the artist Giovanni Lanfranco (you can see it here).

The program ended with a series of dances by the lutenist Falconiero or Falconieri. But although they are lively and popular, I have never found his melodies particularly cogent or engaging. This very enjoyable concert nevertheless deserved a larger audience than it received Friday night. Those who missed it will have another chance Sunday afternoon in Somerville.

Boston Musica Viva: works by Schuller, Brody, and Rodgríguez (Oct. 6, 2013)

"Banned in Boston"? Not Exactly

Boston Musica Viva, the new-music ensemble, opened its forty-fifth season Saturday night with a concert of three substantial works at Boston University's Tsai Performance Center. Music director Richard Pittmann conducted chamber ensembles in music by three established composers, in a program titled "Banned in Boston" and illustrated on the program cover by a couple dancing a sultry theatrical tango.

Local composers Gunther Schuller and Martin Brody, both present, were engaged by Pittmann in extended comments prior to the performances of their two works, which made up the first half of the program. Many in the audience of about two hundred were cheered to see the 87-year-old Schuller engaging in lively repartee with Pittmann and relating some of the background to his *Sonata serenata* for clarinet, violin, cello and piano of 1978. Schuller, who served as president of New England Conservatory from 1967 to 1977, is known especially for his "third-stream" compositions, which mingle elements of jazz and Western classical music. His 1968 book *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* was a pioneering history, still basic. In his conversation with Pittmann, Schuller recounted learning of the death of jazz violinist Joe Venuti as he was beginning to write the second movement of the *Sonata serenata*. As a result, the movement incorporates a technique introduced by Venuti: the cellist at one point switches to a modified instrument and bow that permit the playing of chords on all four strings simultaneously (rather than breaking the chords, playing one or two notes at a time, as in normal string technique).

To these ears, the result failed to convey the intended sound, described by Schuller as resembling a harmonium (a type of reed organ that was popular in nineteenth-century homes). This is no reflection on the playing of cellist Jan Mueller-Szeraws, however, and it was of no consequence for the performance of a piece that was surely the high point of the evening. The work belies any expectations raised by its neoclassical title and movement designations—and perhaps by Schuller's own extended account of it. Neither third-stream nor neo-Classical, the *Sonata serenata* is an elegant example of the uncompromisingly chromatic contrapuntal writing that was favored in American academic music departments during the later twentieth century. Its traditional four-movement form includes a slow second movement, a scherzo-like third, and a rondo finale. But as in similarly designed works from the 1930s by Schoenberg and Webern, the sound is utterly un-classical. The ensemble of four players plus conductor realized Schuller's meticulously crafted score with vehemence, where it was required, but also with the delicacy that is called for in most of the work.

Schuller's score includes more than four pages of detailed performance instructions. But much of the music is so densely textured and goes by so quickly that I could hardly tell whether the performers were observing all the details, or whether that even mattered. What I can say with certainty is that Musica Viva played, beginning with the almost improvisatory opening measures, with great sensitivity to the inventive sonorities of the piece. Although I did not hear a harmonium in the second movement, what Schuller described as the "chirping" of the violin (played by Gabriela Diaz) and the "sad" phrases of the clarinet (William Kirkley) indeed formed a delicate counterpoint to the sustained cello chords. The result was something vaguely reminiscent of the so-called night music in some of Bartók's slow movements.

The third movement, marked "Romanza (Menuetto)" in the score, struck me as more of a scherzo, albeit less one of Beethoven's than perhaps something by Brahms. Schuller mentioned "rhythmic

things” from Brahms among the work's “allusions to the past,” and here pianist Geoffrey Burleson frequently had what sounded to me like little Brahmsian gestures, played expressively in a meter independent of the rest of the ensemble. Even if the concluding “Rondo Giojoso” is a little more square, less fresh-sounding than the first three movements, the work certainly merited this exquisite revisit from Musica Viva, who, according to Pittmann, had played it some twelve years ago. The performance, incidentally, surely benefited from the presence of a conductor. Although the composer's detailed performance notes make no mention of a conductor, it is hard to imagine coordinating the many difficult entrances and the ebb and flow of the tempo (especially in the first movement) without one.

Martin Brody's *Feral: 3 Sketches for Bisclavret* was described, in both the printed notes and the composer's spoken remarks, as a set of “character sketches” relating to an opera that is as yet unfinished. Based on a poem by the twelfth-century Marie de France, and setting a libretto by Mary Campbell, the opera concerns a knight who has the misfortune of also being a werewolf (*bisclavret* in Old Breton). It came as a bit of a disappointment to realize, in the course of the composer's extended account of the work, that what we were to hear were three purely instrumental movements. These are scored for the same ensemble as the Schuller work, with the addition of flute and percussion; they bear the titles “Drone,” Brawl,” and “Catch.” The first title refers to sustained two-note chords that were clearly audible through much of the first movement in the violin and cello. The latter two titles are puns, referring not only to the Renaissance *branle* (English “brawl”) and Medieval *caccia* or round, but, in the latter case, to a hunt of the werewolf through the forest.

My impression is that this work, here receiving its world premiere, was performed accurately and with spirit. Is it possible, however, that the rather confusing nature of Brody's own account of the work reflects a certain lack of clarity in both the meaning of the plot and the design of the music? The remarks of the composer, who teaches at Wellesley, evoked some potentially vivid images. The drone in the first movement represents “a source of potential stability” that tends to get drowned out (intentionally), especially by drums. These are replaced by castanets in the second movement, which represents “a seduction scene between the knight and his wife.” Here Brody invited us to imagine the removal of an article of clothing whenever we heard the castanets.

Yet I could not make out anything clearly evocative of a werewolverine transformation in the first movement. Nor did I hear anything particularly seductive or erotic in the “Brawl” movement—which did not seem to me all that different in sound from the opening “Drone.” The concluding “Catch” did successfully delineate an antithesis between loud unison playing—and hand clapping—by most of the ensemble, on the one hand, and quick passages by the violin, on the other. These violin statements gradually become shorter and higher in pitch before evaporating into silence at the end of the piece. But although Diaz executed her solos with great finesse, I never had the impression of a “frightened creature” on the run. Perhaps I was missing something—or perhaps these pieces would be better heard outside of the context of an extra-musical narrative, even if it is the latter that inspired the composer to write them.

The sole work on the second half of the program was another reperformance, this time of the “one-act comic concert opera” *Tango* by the Texas composer Robert Xavier Rodgríguez. Born in San Antonio and now on the faculty of the University of Texas at Dalls, the composer is said to be best known for his stage works. This was, however, my first exposure to his music.

The libretto, assembled by the composer from contemporary documents, concerns the first international craze for the tango, which took place exactly a century ago on the eve of World War I. Accused of

exciting lascivious and immoral thoughts, the dance was attacked by politicians and even the pope. The text of the opera consists of an Italian cardinal's letter to a Roman newspaper, framed by quotations from the contemporary press. The news clippings are mostly read in a spoken voice; the letter is sung as an aria that also incorporates quotations from sermons on the subject. All three scenes or sections are accompanied by an ensemble of flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano, percussion, and accordion; the latter is a stand-in for the bandoneón of a traditional tango ensemble. (The text of the opera can be read online at http://www.dramonline.org/albums/robert-xavier-rodr-guez-musical-theater-works/notes.)

Boston tenor Frank Kelley executed his part with panache, entering and exiting elegantly as a tuxedo-clad tango instructor, seating himself behind a small table at stage left to read the news clippings into a microphone, donning a choir robe and moving to a lectern at stage right to sing what was in effect an extended sermon. During the news reading his voice, at first accompanied chiefly by an onstage typewriter (played with impressive wpm by flutist Ann Bobo), was gradually covered up by the ensemble as additional instruments entered. Perhaps this was intentional, as the rather predictable reports about the spread of the dance and its effects on public morality became tiresomely repetitive. Kelley came into his own as a singer in the aria, which, although at first limited to rather characterless recitation, achieved moments of intensity as the fulminations against the dance reached a climax.

I was not overwhelmed by the originality of the music. The concept of the work is mildly inventive, but Rodríguez's eclectic writing at many times consists of little more than sound effects, and the intention of the many quotations in the score was unclear to me. I did not understand the purpose of quoting the Andante from Schubert's E-flat-major piano trio during the final newscast—unless it is to point out that the piece's quasi-ostinato accompaniment closely resembles a formula prominent in twentieth-century tango music. But why exactly was it used to accompany some philistinic remarks about "music as we know it"? It was potentially clever of Rodríguez to incorporate the minuet from the famous scene in *Don Giovanni* where three different dances are performed simultaneously. But what is the significance of having the minuet gradually transform into a tango?

Stanley Kubrick had used the same Schubert theme prominently in his 1975 film *Barry Lyndon;* Elliott Carter had pointed to Mozart's opera as a precedent for his own complex counterpoint of musical tempos and characters. The slightly stale quality of the musical allusions in *Tango* might be irrelevant if the work's premisses were clearer or its execution stronger. But the tango is hardly the first dance to have been criticized or even banned. The fandango and the waltz suffered the same when they were new in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and one could easily find further examples.

In fact the tango was not exactly "banned in Boston." Mayor John F. Fitzgerald ("Honey Fitz") did, according to contemporary reports in the *Globe* and the *New York Times,* issue an order in 1911 to prevent its use in public dance halls. On the other hand, a "morceau de concert" entitled *Tango* by the Spanish violinist, conductor, and composer Enrique Fernández Arbós was performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra as early as 1903. It was even included in one of their programs that year during their first concert trip to New York. So the dance has a long and distinguished history of inclusion in Boston new-music concerts.

Indeed, my strongest reservation about Rodgríguez's work concerns the use of tango itself. I did detect occasional echoes of real Argentine tango music—the type that one hears today in *milongas* throughout the world, imaginatively transformed in the compositions of Astor Piazzola and in contemporary *tango nuevo*. But it seems to me that what Rodríguez had in his ears (and the type depicted in the program artwork) is the vulgarized "international" tango of Hollywood and Broadway. For this reason, although the work vaguely criticizes the demonization of a simple dance, or the censorship of an art form, it

never adequately conveys the expressive or creative aspects of the particular art form that is its subject. Instead the tango of *Tango* is a caricature, not so far from the very thing that it was claimed to be by its detractors.

I'm nevertheless glad that Musica Viva offered a second performance of this reasonably recent semi-staged work. Perhaps some inventive younger composer or performer in the audience will have gained a suggestion from it for something that will be more consistently original. Creative musicians can be inspired by failures as well as successes, learning at least as much from what proves to be an over-extended experiment as from a finished masterpiece.

Aston Magna: Marais and Bach (June 28, 2013)

"Pleasing Concerts, Harmonious Sounds"
David Schulenberg

The third concert in Aston Magna's forty-first summer festival took place Thursday night (June 27, 2013) at Brandeis University's Slosberg Auditorium. Soprano Dominique Labelle joined an ensemble of sixteen instrumentalists led by violinist Daniel Stepner. The program will be repeated Friday at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, and Saturday at the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center in Great Barrington.

Artistic director Stepner's imaginatively designed program juxtaposed two of Bach's most popular works with what amounted to a retrospective of music by the less well known French Baroque composer Marin Marais. Marais is not entirely unfamiliar to local audiences; not long ago I reviewed in these pages Duo Maresienne's performance of several of his works.

As Stepner explained in pre-concert remarks, Marais is best known to modern concert-goers as a rather opportunistic young royal musician in the 1991 film *Tous les matins du monde.* But this was hardly a historically accurate depiction of a composer who, like his contemporaries François Couperin on the harpsichord and Bach on the organ, was the greatest living exponent of his instrument: the now-rare bass viol or viola da gamba.

Laura Jeppesen, who demonstrated her seven-stringed French gamba during the pre-concert presentation, was thus the star of the first half. She, together with Stepner, performed difficult passagework with grace and aplomb in Marais's G-minor Passacaille and his famous *Sonnerie de Sainte Geneviève*. But what really impressed me was the exquisite and seemingly effortless performance of the equally difficult but quieter prelude and allemande in C from Marais's third book of viol pieces. These were accompanied solely by a large lute or theorbo, played sensitively by Catherine Liddell. Although the latter tended to get covered up in other selections, here the two created a quite special sound, resonating with complete clarity in Slosberg despite the rather full house.

As the final segment of the first half we heard selections from Marais's fourth and last opera *Sémélé,* premiered in 1709. This work, on the same subject as Handel's secular oratorio *Semele,* lies stylistically between the earlier French operas of Lully and the later ones of Rameau. Having performed under Lully at the Paris opera from the 1670s onward, Marais knew the style well, and as director of the ensemble since 1706 he knew latter's capabilities.

Like other works of the period, *Sémélé* follows conventions familiar to listeners who know Lully's music from performances such as BEMF's 2007 production of *Psyché*. But it has much lusher vocal and instrumental writing, including colorful solos for the winds and virtuoso passages for the strings that anticipate things that Rameau would write several decades later. These include a vivid depiction of an earthquake near the end of the opera, which was played with perfect ensemble to brilliant effect.

Unfortunately, I must again, as I did last week in comments on Rockport's *Play of Daniel,* complain that listeners were given no texts or translations for vocal music in which the words are paramount. In this case the program did not even specify which selections from the opera we were hearing. If it were not for the complete vocal score of the work from 1709 that is available online at the increasingly indispensable website imslp.org, your reviewer would not have been able to tell you exactly what we heard.

What we did hear, after the overture, was, first, “Goutons ici les plus doux charmes,” sung by a Priestess of Bacchus during the opera's prologue. This grand aria or *ariette*—one of the first in French opera—will surprise anyone who imagines that French Baroque music is any less virtuosic than contemporary Italian works. Its vocal coloratura, which was both expressive and brilliant in Labelle's performance, is echoed not only by the violins but by a florid trumpet part that might have reminded some in the audience of Purcell. As Stepner explained earlier in the evening, however, practical considerations led to his re-assigning the trumpet line here to the oboe, which was played capably by Stephen Hammer.

This was followed by a brief sarabande, “Quel bruit nouveaux,” in which the Priestess welcomes the god Apollo. References in the poem (by Lamotte) to “pleasing concerts, harmonious sounds” aptly described the ravishing sound here of the winds and upper strings. The final selections, from the opera's concluding *divertissement,* included the astonishing earthquake music. Here LaBelle sang both the exclamation “Ciel! quel bruit souterain,” originally for chorus, and Semele's final speech, “Peuples, rassurez vous, Jupiter va apparaître.” Echoing the close of Lully's *Armide* and anticipating that of *Götterdämmerung,* this as well as the brief closing *prélude* for the orchestra was done smashingly.

The second half consisted chiefly of Bach's Second Brandenburg Concerto and his Cantata 51 (“Jauchzet Gott”). Between them we heard the famous Air from Bach's Third Orchestral Suite. The latter was played in memory of Mary Ruth Ray, founding violist of the Lydian String Quartet and until her death last January chair of Brandeis's Music Department. (Wandering around the building, I noticed that her name is still on her door.)

Stepner, a long-time colleague of Ray, led the violins in an unusually sensitive playing of the florid melody. Listening, as seemed appropriate on the occasion, to the inner as well as the outer strings, I was struck by the execution of the viola part. Bach is supposed to have enjoyed playing the viola in ensembles, and although the instrument is usually neglected by composers, he often, as here, gave it opportunities for real expression. These were taken, elegantly and without ostentation, by the three players, who included Jeppesen as well as long-time Aston Magna violist David Miller and Barbara Wright.

In the concerto, as Stepner pointed out, Bach gives one of the four solo instruments an unusually challenging part: the trumpet, which was played by Josh Cohen. Cohen played on the right, facing sideways toward Stepner (leading the ensemble on the left). The trumpet therefore did not blast outwards at the audience, which would have been a disaster in Slosberg's close space (there is no stage, and the front row of seats is only steps away from the performance area). Nor did I sense any balance problems between Cohen and the quieter recorder (played by Christopher Krueger) or Hammer's oboe. I've mentioned in the past the use of so-called vent holes by modern players of the so-called natural trumpet, so this was not exactly a Baroque instrument. But the difficult part was played with complete command and control.

It's hard for musicians to find anything new in this much-played piece, and I can't say that this performance shed new light on it for me. The multiplying of players on the so-called ripieno string parts may, as is often the case, have contributed to a slight heaviness in the quick outer movements. This might, however, have been due to the equally common tendency to sound every beat with practically the same emphatic articulation. In the quieter, trumpet-free slow movement, I *thought* I might have heard a slight relaxation in what a passage that could be set off as something a bit special (it begins at the exact center of this Andante). But in the absence of any strongly projected nuances, I'm

afraid that this performance confirmed the impression of the movement as seemingly “formless,” as Joseph Orchard put it in his program note.

Labelle, who sang Marais with the requisite attention to French Baroque declamation and ornamentation, returned at the end for Bach's “Jauchzet Gott.” This work—which may well have originated much earlier than the 1730 date given in the notes—is not really a church cantata but rather a German equivalent of the eighteenth-century Latin solo motet; Mozart's *Exsultate, jubilate* is a late example. It is, in other words, a display piece for a solo soprano, here joined by an equally virtuoso trumpet and strings.

This is a spectacular work, and it received a spectacular performance. Labelle's singing left every note clear, even in the quick arpeggios at the end of the final Alleluja. The quieter arioso and aria at the center of the work were beautifully phrased, with fine playing here as well by continuo cellist Loretta O'Sullivan (Michael Beattie was the capable keyboard player throughout the evening, here accompanying on organ). I am not a fan of the modern fashion for standing at the end of any exciting performance, and even in a superb execution (such as this one) Bach's cantata is more thrilling than deeply moving. Yet this was a discerning audience, and no one could fault the majority who rose to their feet at the end of this dazzling performance.

The *Play of Daniel* (June 22, 2013)

Friday evening (June 21, 2013) saw a performance of what artistic director David Deveau described in prefatory remarks as the earliest music ever performed in the Rockport Chamber Music Festival. Yet, as became clear in a “talkback” session between audience and performers afterward, it was also the newest music. Much of it was improvised for the occasion, never to be heard again, as music director Mary Anne Ballard explained in response to a question.

The *Play of Daniel* was, as described in the festival program booklet, “a medieval music drama set in Beauvais Cathedral, circa 1200 A.D.” More precisely, it is an example of what scholars call liturgical drama, a more or less theatrical reading of texts interpolated into a church service: in this case, a retelling of two incidents from the Book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible. It was originally performed as part of services for the Feast of the Circumcision, better known in our modern calendar as New Year's Day. The play has nothing to do with an actual bris, as Ballard also explained in answer to another question. But it would have been performed on the eighth day after Christmas, commemorating the circumcision of Jesus—who, despite the story's Old Testament origin, is the real focus of this decidedly Christian work.

Performing any medieval music, and particularly liturgical drama, raises all sorts of questions about historicity and performance practice, to which I shall return. But first let me describe what I saw without any consideration of its status as “early music” or “historically informed” performance.

There were hisses and mock boos as the curtain behind the stage was closed prior to the performance in the beautiful Shalin Liu Performance Center. Friday had seen perfect weather, and with the curtain open the window behind the stage gave the audience an exceptional view of Rockport's still sunny coast and harbor. The transformation of the room from sun-lit concert hall to darkened theater was ably carried out, however. When it was complete, one saw a table, a few chairs, and a larger armchair at center stage, with an assortment of musical instruments to the right. The armchair would serve during the first half of the play as throne for the Babylonian king Belshazzar—who presided over the captivity of the Jews—and during the second half for the Persian ruler Darius, who supplanted him. Daniel, who accurately prophesies Belshazzar's overthrow in the first half, is thrown into the lions' den in the second, only to be released at the end by an angel, thereupon declaring the coming birth of Jesus.

The production, stage-directed by Drew Minter and Jeffrey Johnson (who also performed in several minor roles), was ingeniously adapted to the compact space of the Shalin Liu center. The thirteen singers as well as six instrumentalists, all in quasi-medieval costume, entered and exited in processions down the hall's two aisles. The action, or rather dialogue, took place largely around the table on the stage, the six musicians (including music director Ballard) taking their places on either side. Their lutes, recorders, and harps therefore became part of the staging, as suggested by a few of the work's original performance rubrics. So too did an array of less obviously medieval percussion instruments, including suspended cymbal and waterphone. The latter, a device used in film and television

soundtracks, provoked an entertaining explanation from percussionist Rex Benincasa in the talkback session. In the performance, it provided occasional sound effects, as did some of the other instruments, in a manner that reminded me of kabuki theater.

At center stage, behind the action, was a deep blue curtain backdrop suspended within a black square frame. This was revealed in the second half to be a representation of the lions' den, as the curtain was pulled away to reveal a design of stylized lions' teeth. Real lions also appeared, in the guise of two actors dancing down the aisles in colorful costumes. Other costumes (designed by Sasha Richter) were more conventionally medieval, and Brian Barnett's lighting design brought out their bright colors. Visually, then, this was a gorgeous production, particularly notable for the spectacular outfits worn by two angels and for singers' gestures which director Minter based on his study of artwork at New York's Cloisters Museum (this according to talkback remarks by Gene Murrow, executive director of Gotham Early Music Scene or GEMS, which produced the performance; Minter himself was not present).

As musical theater this production was charming. It clearly seized the imagination of the audience, which filled most of the hall's 330 seats. I particularly enjoyed the expressive singing of tenor James Ruff as Daniel, and four sopranos (Amy Bartram, Melissa Fogarty, Sarah Gallogly, and Amaranta Viera) sang and danced gracefully in minor roles. The nature of the work, however, is such as to make it difficult to single out any individuals from the ensemble; suffice it to say that I was not aware of a single weak link in the intricate production.

The stylized character of the play affords few opportunities for real drama. Some humor was interjected by a few exchanges between Ballard, playing little melodic fragments on rebec and vielle, and one or another singer. A shift at the end from Old-Testament history or story-telling to Christian sanctity and ritual was carried out impressively: the stage lights dimmed and the entire company exited up the aisles in procession, singing the Gregorian chant "Te Deum," as directed by the original text, to the accompaniment of small handbells. (The latter are depicted in late-medieval artworks such as the famous "Figure of Music" at Chartres cathedral, reproduced in the program book.)

Given what many in the audience clearly found to be an engrossing, even moving, theatrical experience, some may think it impertinent to make an issue of the production's status as historical performance. Yet a number of the questions in the talkback session clearly reflected the curiosity of audience members about the degree to which this performance resembled an actual medieval one. Answers by members of the cast and crew did not entirely clarify the issue.

It is understandable that, after an intense hour-long performance, singers and musicians would not be prepared to answer questions quite as thoroughly or directly as might have been done under other circumstances. Some of the questions could have been answered by reference to the commentary in the program book. But the latter also gave a less than entirely forthcoming characterization of the production. For this presentation could be considered historical or "authentic" only to the degree that this is true of any modern staging of, say, a Shakespeare play.

Indeed, what we saw might better be characterized as a contemporary work that happened to incorporate the text and melodies of a medieval act of worship. These were adapted for the modern stage using various devices, some of them suggested by historical practices that were in use at various places in Europe during the eleventh through fourteen centuries. Among these were the elaboration of the original melodies through the techniques known as parallel organum and discant, as well as certain types of melodic decoration or embellishment known from late-medieval instrumental music. The instruments themselves are, of course, another borrowing from medieval or early-Renaissance

practices, although hardly any original instruments actually survive; what we were hearing were modern constructions based mainly on visual art of the period, and on backward deductions from later instruments.

The original *Play of Daniel* is believed to have been performed during services at Beauvais Cathedral in northern France—not in the existing, never-finished late-Gothic structure, but a smaller, earlier one that was nevertheless far larger than the confined space of either the Rockport hall or The Cloisters, where this production was created in 2008. The original performers were members of the clergy—doubtless all men, even for the one female role, that of Belshazzar's queen. In all likelihood there were no instruments at all, except perhaps as props. But whether there was in fact any staging—costumes, props, or movement other than ritual processions—is unknown.

Crucially for the music, the original notation shows only pitches: notes without rhythm. Like later examples of Gregorian chant, which it resembles, the music may well have been sung slowly, with little inflection or nuance. Most of the text, in Latin with a few phrases in French, is in a type of medieval verse that falls into regular rhythmic patterns. Scholars have long assumed that these patterns can be applied to the music as well. But this can be done convincingly only in certain portions of the music, which divides into distinct types. In most modern editions and performances, some of these are presented in the manner of Gregorian chant, whereas others are given a dancelike quality.

This performance strongly emphasized the dance element, with drums and other instruments frequently marking the steady beat that is merely implicit in the original words and music. Only brief portions of the text were sung without accompaniment by instruments, which also furnished interludes. Much of what the instrumentalists were playing apparently consisted of improvisation, although Ballard took credit for the arrangement as a whole and clearly took a large role in creating the sound—the very musical identity—of this performance.

This sound resembles in a general way what one hears nowadays in many "historical informed" performances of early music, including some that took place last week during the Boston Early Music Festival. Yet I doubt that what we hear in such performances is any more or less historical than in a work such as Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. No one thinks of the latter as "medieval" music, even though it consists of arrangements of genuine medieval songs, one or two of which recur in the *Play of Daniel.*

At times, what I was hearing reminded me of nothing more than Prokofiev or neo-Classical Stravinsky, as harps and lutes created a sort of pan-diatonic ostinato or drone background for a singer. The effect could be lovely, but I cannot believe it had much to do with medieval music. Certainly the chords and the little scale figures that the instrumentalists were playing have little basis in what we know of twelfth-century French music, even if a casual listener might find them vaguely reminiscent of the Parisian organum of the period. Even less certifiably medieval were the suggestions of contemporary Arabic or perhaps Turkish or north-African idioms in some of the lute and percussion accompaniments.

The reason this matters is that a production such as this, as effective as it is, enshrines and reinforces certain twentieth-century notions about medieval music and its performance. Ballard told the talkback audience that she made her arrangement without consulting the one that was performed in 1958 by the New York Pro Musica under the direction of Noah Greenberg. That production, according to the program booklet, was "arguably the single most important early music event in twentieth-century Ameria." I remember being enthralled by a recording of it that I came across, years later, as a high school student. The exotic instrumental sounds, the conviction of the singing, and the catchiness of

some of the modal melodies surely did give it a popular appeal that attracted many to the incipient historical performance movement.

Yet I was astonished by Ballard's remark, for in many ways this production seemed very close to that New York one of more than half a century ago. Many details of scoring, such as the bells in the closing recessional or the frequent use of drone accompaniments, are quite similar, as is the "rhythmicization" of much of the music. More fundamentally, the basic approach, turning a sacred liturgy, probably performed at daybreak, into an evening of fully staged musical theater, was evidently the same (although I never saw the New York production). Of course, modern audiences would never stand for the much more solemn and austere type of performance implied by the historical sources.

Or would they? Fifty or one hundred years ago no one could have imagined Bach "cantatas" performed with all-male quartets of singers instead of large mixed choirs. Musicologists knew that Renaissance instruments were very different from their modern counterparts, but hardly anyone actually played lutes or small medieval-style harps. When they did so, it was within a cliquish if not cultish atmosphere of historical reenactment, not contemporary creative music making. To perform a Baroque opera with anything like original staging, gesture, and dance was completely out of the question.

Of course, we now know that all these things are possible. More important, they have completely changed how we experience Renaissance and Baroque music. We know, too, that doing things "authentically" does not mean museum-style petrification—not that museums, either, must present historical material without creative imagination. Some audiences do enjoy things that are strange or challenging, although recreating the sound world of a Romanesque cathedral service in the confined space of a small modern theater would be difficult—and potentially offputting to a secular audience seeking a night of entertainment.

As much as I appreciate what Ballard, Minter, and the rest of the company have done in creating a convincing modern stage piece from this work, I am disappointed that I saw no serious grappling with the conceptual challenges that it presents. What would have happened if, instead of hammering those quizzically notated melodies into dancelike numbers, the singers were allowed to present them free of the tyranny of a rock-like beat, and without the nearly constant and sometimes distracting elaboration and interruption by instruments? For that matter, how much more expressive might this work be if performed with more attention to the actual words—which seemed to be largely ignored in a production that lacked either a printed libretto or translated supertitles?

The Latin is not difficult, but even a listener (such as your reviewer) who has a smattering of the language had a hard time understanding any of it over the occasional din of percussion instruments and in the modern French-style pronunciation with which it was sung. Contrary to what Deveau asserted at the outset, the action of the production is not "self-explanatory," even to one who knows the biblical story. Not only details but essential elements, such as the appearance of the minor prophet Habakkuk near the end, led by an angel to bring nourishment to Daniel in the lions' den, must have been baffling to many audience members.

In writing about this production, I am mindful of Joel Cohen's thoughtful response to the Newbury Consort's recent performance of the Cantigas of the Spanish king Alfonso "the Wise" (reviewed at http://classical-scene.com/2013/06/14/newberry-cantigas/). Those works, roughly contemporary with the *Play of Daniel,* require similar musical reconstruction if they are to be performed today. As Cohen reminds us, "we are centuries away from any living performance tradition for these works . . . as with all medieval music we seek to perform anew, the recreation of some sort of plausible playing and

singing ethos is a paramount consideration."

Plausibility is indeed one criterion of judgement. But historical plausibility ("authenticity") is a very different thing from theatrical or artistic credibility. This production was a convincing theatrical experience; an imaginative melange of contemporary and historical performance traditions; a creative reworking of an ancient text—but it was not exactly a medieval music drama.

Renaissance and early Baroque works played by The Royal Wind Music (June 17, 2013)

Paul Leenhouts and The Royal Wind Music

Renaissance instruments pose a problem: athough many original examples survive, and many more are documented in artwork and writings of the period, we have very little music that was actually composed for them, apart from keyboards and the lute. (Even then, precisely what sort of keyboard or lute was intended is rarely clear.)

The wealthy often kept sets, or consorts, of instruments such as the recorder, and in modern times playing recorders of various sizes and pitches together has become a popular form of both professional and amateur music making. Yet hardly any Renaissance music was written specifcially for the recorder. Rather, like the vocal music of the period, sixteenth-century music for instrumental ensemble was printed in sets of part-books designated only by their range: soprano, alto, and so forth. Players presumably made their own arrangements of such music, matching each part to an instrument of suitable type and range while adding ornaments and other idiomatic touches to the written notes.

Sunday's offering by The Royal Wind Music, the final concert of the 2013 Boston Early Music Festival, reflected this tradition of ad hoc arrangement. The ensemble of thirteen recorder players was directed by Paul Leenhouts, who played himself in several pieces and was, according to the program, responsible for “all arrangements and diminutions.” (“Diminution” was the sixteenth-century term for improvised embellishment, so called because most melodic decoration consisted of many quick, or small, notes substituted for a few slower-moving or larger ones.)

Thus, in place of unwritten improvisation by individual performers, we heard something that apparently had been meticulously prepared ahead of time—indeed, well ahead of time, as most of the program reproduced that of a CD issued earlier this year. To be sure, “improvisation” today, whether in jazz or early music, is usually a mix of formula and invention. In principle, a performance whose details are all prepared in advance could sound as spontaneous as one that is arranged or embellished on the spot. This performance was well performed, and it received enthusiastic applause from the Jordan Hall audience. But I'm afraid that I was unable to share that enthusiasm.

The program consisted of close to two dozen pieces by seventeen composers, under the title “Angeli, Zingare e Pastori: Symbols and Allegories in Italian Renaissance Music.” Angels were represented by wordless performances of four Latin motets, plus one of Salamone Rossi's unique settings of verses from the Hebrew Bible. Shepherds presumably would have participated in dances such as Orazio Vecchi's “Gitene Ninfe.” But I could not detect anything even vaguely Roma in the selections (a *zingaro* is an Italian gypsy). Any symbols and allegories were hidden in the unsung texts of the works arranged from vocal numbers.

The repertory was actually less “Renaissance” than from the later period that we regard as the transition to the Baroque. Most of the works were from the two or three decades on either side of 1600. Although not all were originally written for instrumental consort, the eclectic mix of music by both familiar and obscure composers was potentially very interesting.

Before the performers appeared, the stage was already arranged with about thirty “Renaissance” recorders ranging from piccolo or sopranino isntruments upright on stands to a monstrous double bass lying on the floor (how historical some of these instruments are is open to question). It was certainly entertaining to watch and hear a constantly changing combination of such instruments taken up and

played—entirely from memory—in nearly perfect intonation, and with perfect ensemble. This sort of spectacle has been one of the attractions of early music since the modern tradition began a century ago.

But for one who is not an enthusiast, the ravishing effect of the sound of massed recorders quickly fades. The homogeneity of an all-recorder ensemble makes it most effective in relatively simple pieces, as in the forthright harmonies of the opening “Intrada” by Alessandro Orologio. I was almost convinced as well by the performance of “Viri Galilaei” by Palestrina, one of that master's less contrapuntally complex works.

On the other hand, the intricate counterpoint of ricercars by Frescobaldi and Andrea Gabrieli was, through no fault of the players, largely opaque. Girolamo Cavazzoni's “Falt d'argens”—an arrangement of a polyphonic chanson originally by Josquin Desprez—became a solo for Leenhouts, playing an elegantly embellished upper line to the rumbling accompaniment of two bass and one contrabass (or was it a sub-contrabass?) recorder.

This last work was performed by a quartet, but the majority of the program was played by the whole group of thirteen, and this listener found many of those items quite problematical. Leenhouts, who is director of early music studies at the University of North Texas, also led the UNT Baroque Orchestra earlier in BEMF week, in a “fringe” concert sponsored by Early Music America. That performance, like this one, was technically accomplished. But, again like this one, it belonged to a type that in today's early-music world seems increasingly old fashioned: a large ensemble conducted in the modern manner by a director who has evidently made all the important musical decisions himself.

Leenhout's creative contribution to Sunday's performance went well beyond what we know of historical practice. At least eight of the selections were arrangements of music for lute or keyboard. Any professional wind or string player of the sixteenth or early seventeenth century was probably prepared to play stylishly from parts that were originally meant for the singers of a motet, a French chanson, or an Italian madrigal. But the same player could not easily have performed music written in keyboard score or in the tablature notation used by lute players. Like Respighi's “Ancient Dances and Arias”—early twentieth-century arrangements of Renaissance lute pieces—Leenhout's arrangements for massed recorder ensemble are orchestrations that belong to a specifically twentieth-century tradition.

One problem with this is that when two or three recorder players must double up on a line designed for a single singer or player, the effect can never be the same as when a soloist performs it. I was actually impressed by the players' expressive unanimity in a few passages. But more often I felt that the music suffered under the tyranny of a conductor. The doubled embellishments in the “Consonanze stravaganti” by the Flemish composer Giovanni de Macque seemed to me grotesque: mechanical where a soloist's freedom was called for, and hardly bringing out the startling “extravagant harmonies” of this proto-Baroque composer (who worked for Gesualdo). It did not help, here and in other pieces, that the bass, and sometimes other parts, was doubled at the octave—an orchestral effect that gave this music an unnecessarily thick and heavy sound.

At the risk of going on unduly in this manner, I must also point out that the frequent juxtaposition of music from different places and periods did not make for a coherent program. The beautiful little motet “Adoramus te, Christi” by Paolo Agostini, active at Rome a generation or two after Palestrina, was sandwiched between two much earlier and more mediocre works by the north-Italian composers Jacopo Corfini and Ascanio Trombetti. A fine instrumental canzona by the early-Baroque composer Tarquinio Merula, “La Chremasca,” received a lively performance. But it was followed by an older and more austere piece by the organist Gioseffo Guami that in this context made little impression, at least on this

listener. In a program of brief selections, a work can be over before a listener has adjusted to a fundamental change in style. Guami's serious polyphony, somewhat in the manner of Andrea Gabrieli, might have made more sense as part of a set of like pieces.

Many who attended the performance will differ with my views. Yet the standing ovation that some gave it seemed to me to have been earned only by its technical accomplishment. Those numbers that were originally for voices might have been moving if sung well, or if they had been graced by the type of expressive diminution that instrumentalists of the period sometimes added. But the performances tended to focus on virtuoso aspects of the music, sometimes as well on humorous quirks, to the detriment of deeper elements.

For instance, an arrangement of a keyboard ricercar by Frescobaldi was played with humor that reflected the composer's self-imposed rule in this piece of avoiding all melodic motion by step (the lines move only by leaping). Yet this was one of several pieces in which an excessively chirpy approach, combined with a very lively tempo, eliminated the possibility of an expressive melodic line, leaving the music merely entertaining. The last four numbers—early-Baroque dances by Rossi and the Neapolitan organist Trabaci—were significant works, but I did not feel that they were well served by Leenhout's versions, which seemed to me overblown (figuratively speaking).

This was the second wind-band concert of this year's festival, following the “Symphonie des Dragons” directed by Gonzalo Ruiz on Tuesday. (Disclosure: Ruiz is my colleague in Juilliard's Historical Performance program.) But whereas the latter was a focused recreation of the late-Baroque double-reed band, the present concert was a wide-ranging exercise in creative anachronism. All “early music,” of course, might be described as such. But what was anachronistic in this case was the dated, quasi-orchestral approach to works that were composed for soloists and chamber musicians. It was well executed, and for many it was great fun to listen to—but it gave a monochromatic view of a diverse repertory.

Boston Early Music Festival Organ "Mini-Fest" (June 14, 2013)

BEMF Organ Mini-Festival
David Schulenberg

The Boston Early Music Festival's Sixth Organ "Mini-Festival" took place Thursday, June 13, 2013 at Boston's First Lutheran Church. Three organists contributed recitals under the general heading "The Genius of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)." Their selections, presented in roughly chronological order, provided an overview of the music that Bach wrote for the instrument over the course of some four decades.

To report the last first, the event concluded with an afternoon recital by John Scott, formerly of St. Paul's Cathedral, London, now at St. Thomas Episcopal Church in New York. This was a superb performance of Part 3 from Bach's *Clavierübung*, the modestly titled "Keyboard Practice" which was actually the composer's culminating work for keyboard instruments. Part 3, which Bach published in 1739, consists mostly of what we call chorale preludes: elaborated versions of traditional Lutheran hymn tunes. These are framed by a grand opening prelude and a closing fugue.

To play these twenty-three distinct pieces in order (Scott omitted the four duos), as a cycle, is probably as historically inauthentic as to do so for Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, another encyclopedic work. Whether such a performance makes sense as a contemporary concert program is equally open to question, given the longueurs that can arise in some of the more esoteric movements and the absence of a clear musical shape or direction arising out of their particular sequence. But there is a well-established modern tradition of performing and recording the music integrally, and when played as brilliantly as by Scott one can hardly complain.

The performance, carried out without a break, lasted for some ninety-five minutes, during which I detected no significant lapses of any sort, a remarkable feat in playing music as intellectually and physically demanding as this. Usually in a performance of this work, there is a loss of tension in certain movements, as in the archaic Kyrie-Christe-Kyrie sequence that follows the opening prelude. Yet Scott made these as compelling as anything, and the last of the *pedaliter* Kyries was made particularly impressive by a subtle, controlled deceleration that coincided with the startling series of remote chromatic modulations in the piece's final passage. (The chorale settings alternate between ten or eleven for hands alone and an equal number that involve the feet as well, playing the organ pedals. These *pedaliter* movements are longer and more taxing, not only for the player but for the listener.)

Scott's playing is not only clear but also reveals deep insight into Bach's counterpoint and harmony. From the opening of the prelude to the end of the fugue, his technical mastery of the music seemed almost irrelevant, for his playing, while free of mannerism, is expressive, full of nuances that reflect the structure of the composition.

In a performance as impressive as this it is not easy to single out individual items. But I would be remiss not to mention the very lively performance of the *pedaliter* "Jesus Christus, unser Heiland"—almost too lively, in that the rapid tempo perhaps made some complex passages glide by too evenly. Yet it was exhilirating to hear such virtuoso music played with complete confidence eighty-five minutes into the program. Notable in this piece as well was a particularly bright registration, although throughout the program Scott made excellent choices that displayed the wonderful timbral possibilities of the Baroque-style organ by Richards, Fowkes & Co. (2000).

Earlier in the day, William Porter, who directed the event as a whole, also provided the first offering: “The Young Bach: Ohrdruf to Weimar.” Ohrdruf was the town where the ten-year-old Bach went to live with his older brother after the death of his parents. Whether Bach composed any music there and whether any of it survives remains uncertain. Most of the music played on the first two recitals probably dates from Bach's time at the ducal court of Weimar (later the city of Schiller and Goethe) from 1708 to 1717.

As Porter noted in his extensive prefatory remarks, the oldest of the day's three soloists presented works that the composer had written earliest in his career. He might have added, however, that placing any of these works in a given time and place not only remains controversial among specialists, but is also to some degree a matter of definition. For instance, the G-minor prelude and fugue that Porter played (BWV 535) exists in at lest three versions. The earliest may date from as early as 1707 or so, but the last received its final touches as late as the 1740s. Porter chose to play the early version of the prelude but the late version of the fugue—a significant choice, for the revised version of the fugue is more refined but also more ornate, less austere, than the early one, reflecting a substantial change in Bach's compositional style.

Porter, formerly at New England Conservatory, now teaches at Eastman (in Rochester) and McGill (in Montreal). As he mentioned in his opening remarks, even Bach's early works, including this G-minor prelude and fugue, continue to be popular with players. Indeed, Bach himself seems to have continued to use this particular piece in his teaching throughout his life (a point made by this reviewer in his forthcoming new edition of the work, part of a series being issued by the German publisher Breitkopf & Härtel).

The same was not true, however, of the so-called Neumeister chorales, which passed into obscurity and were identified as Bach's only in the 1980s. Their attribution to him continues to be met with reservations by some scholars. Porter offered three of these, as well as the Partita (or variations) on the chorale melody “O Gott, du frommer Gott.” The latter work is certainly by Bach, less certainly intended for organ. Indeed, none of these early chorale compositions require organ pedals, although they assuredly do sound most effectively on a beautifully designed organ like First Lutheran's, as opposed to a harpsichord or clavichord.

The major works on Porter's program were the so-called *Pièce d'orgue* (a fantasia in G, BWV 572) and three preludes and fugues. The latter, besides the G-minor, included the early one in C major (BWV 531), whose trumpet-like opening provided an appropriate fanfare at the start of the concert, and the E-major (BWV 566), which ended the program. In each of these, Porter chose to vary the registration from one section to the next. I found this unnecessary, tending to break up pieces that were probably still conceived as continuous improvisations rather than as distinct movements (the E-major piece is actually a praeludium comprising two separate prelude-and-fugue sequences). This, however, is a quibble.

The day's central performance was by the Milan organist Lorenzo Ghielmi, who teaches at the Schola Cantorum in Basel (Switzerland). His recital was titled “The Mature Bach: Weimar to Leipzig,” although in truth all his selections were likely drafted at Weimar, most of them probably during the earlier part of Bach's time there.

Bookending Ghielmi's program were the Prelude and Fugue in A minor (BWV 543) and the Toccata in C (BWV 564). Both are grand yet slightly undisciplined pieces that reveal the still youthful Bach at his most exuberant, spinning out long sequences of regularly patterned yet infectious virtuoso

passagework. In between came selections from Bach's two Weimar collections of organ chorales, the *Orgelbüchlein* (Little Organ Book) and the so-called Eighteen Chorales. There were also two important pieces inspired by music from Italy: the Fugue in B minor on themes from a trio sonata by Corelli, and Bach's arrangement of Vivaldi's Concerto in D minor, op. 3, no. 11.

These were clear, no-nonsense performances. If occasionally unrelenting—particularly in the fugues—such playing, as one fellow audience member suggested to me, is preferable to the obtrusive, self-indulgent or arbitrary manipulations of tempo and registration that often characterized Bach organ playing twenty or thirty years ago. Within the sphere of "early music," Bach's organ music remains something of a special taste, neglected by audiences that flock to the latest folk-Baroque cross-over concert or yet another Brandenburg set. The ample audience for the three players in this mini-festival seems to have consisted in large part of fellow organists. Yet performances such as these could convince anyone that this music is no less compelling, and no less astonishingly original, than anything else Bach wrote.

French Baroque chamber works performed by Duo Maresienne (May 20, 2013)

Violinist Lisa Brooke joined Duo Maresienne on Sunday afternoon (May 19) to play a program of early eighteenth-century works by French composers. The concert, which took place at the Somerville Museum, was a repeat of one given the previous evening at Lindsay Chapel of First Church, Cambridge.

The well-thought out program opened and closed with works by the two of the greatest instrumental composers of the late Baroque in France: the harpsichordist François Couperin ("le Grand") and Marin Marais, the virtuoso player and composer of music for the viola da gamba. In between came less well known works, among them three sonatas that leaned heavily toward the more Italianate side of late-Baroque music-making, in which French and Italian styles were sharply differentiated.

For this reason the concert's title, "Instrumental Gems From the French Baroque," was not quite right. But it was nevertheless a most satisfying concert, not least for the spirited performances of several less familiar works. Only the opening selection, the first of Couperin's *Concerts royaux* ("Royal Concerts"), is widely known, today more familiar in performances with flute rather than violin on the leading part. (Couperin specified no instrument and even allowed the work to be played on solo harpsichord.)

The hall at the Somerville Museum in which I heard this performance has, at least for the time being, the ambiance of a construction site, but it is not a bad venue for this music. Seating no more than about fifty, on folding chairs, it nevertheless has a high ceiling and numerous windows on its bare walls. This makes for a lively acoustic perhaps comparable to that of the mirrored halls in which this music might originally have been heard. It is, however, an unforgiving space, and both the beauties and the inevitable flubs of the musicians are all perfectly audible to the audience, seated just a few feet away from the performers.

The Duo, comprising Carol Lewis on viola da gamba and Olav Chris Henriksen on theorbo and guitar, furnished a basso continuo accompaniment to the violin for much of the program. Listeners today are more accustomed to hearing this type of accompaniment supplied by cello and harpsichord. But the quieter gamba and the lute-like theorbo were favored for chamber music in Baroque France, and their subtlety is perfectly suited to this highly nuanced music.

The Baroque guitar, which Henricksen took up in several of the works, is quite a different instrument from its modern counterpart, with only five gut strings (or rather courses), tuned in a so-called re-entrant arrangement like that of a banjo. Although capable of percussive effects, it too is subtler than the modern instrument. In fact I found it occasionally too subtle, especially in the "Lentement" movement of Dornel's sonata "La Senaillé." Here some potentially expressive harmonic surprises (very characteristic of French Baroque style) went unmarked. But this was far preferable to the unrefined strumming that passes for continuo playing with some modern players of the instrument. Baroque guitarists did use strumming as well as finger technique, but the music on this program calls chiefly for the latter. I was glad to hear it, especially in slow movements, where every detail of the improvised accompaniment was audible (as it should be).

Musically the high point of the program may well have been two works by Marais for gamba and (in this performance) theorbo. Both the "Cloches, or Carillon" and the prelude that preceded it are *tours de force* for the soloist, full of frighteningly difficult passages. I'm not sure whether this performance pulled off the difficult task of making compelling musical unities out of these wildly diverse pieces. But they were played with confidence that surely projected Marais's capriciously changing expressive and musical ideas.

Almost equally convincing was the performance of the final work, Marais's eponymous *Sonate à la Maresienne*. Although the principal part here is that of the violin, Marais includes substantial passagework for his own instrument. The title must refer to the piece's sometimes playful, sometimes dramatic juxtapositions of sharply contrasting matter; evidently these changes were the composer's calling card. Particularly effective in this performance were some startling stylistic and harmonic contrasts in the slow second movement. Yet in quick passages the musicians sometimes seemed to be working very hard without quite projecting the good humor of the music.

Something of the same problem surfaced in the opening work by Couperin and in the Italianate sonatas by Louis-Antoine Dornel and Jean-Baptiste Senaillé that formed the core of the program. These lacked a certain *sprezzatura*, the virtuoso nonchalance that was admired in both Italian and French virtuosos of the period. Here, too, the violin was not aided by the close acoustic of the room, which seemed to magnify the inevitable small flaws in tone and intonation.

These were nevertheless engaging, energetic performances, although they did raise the question of why Dornel called one of the sonatas "La Couperin." For this was an entirely Italianate work, stylistically akin to the sonatas of Corelli and not at all close to Couperin's own style. Nor was Dornel's "La Senaillé" notably similar to the sonata (op. 4, no. 4) by the actual Senaillé, although in this case both works share a predominantly Italian style. In this, incidentally, I must differ with the view that Henricksen offered in spoken remarks about the piece. Could the title of the first work mean that it was actually a dedication to Couperin rather than a musical description of him? Or was Couperin, today seen as the epitome of French Baroque style, viewed by his contemporaries as an italophile?

Be that as it may, the performances of the quick movements in these pieces generated considerable excitement, and I was glad to hear some apparently improvised embellishments in the repeated sections of the slow second movement of "La Senaillé." There might have been even more of these, however, and perhaps the movement's unusual tempo mark—*très grave* (very slow)—could have been taken more to heart to make an even deeper impression.

Of special interest to this writer were two rare transcriptions: Robert de Visée's theorbo arrangement of Couperin's harpsichord piece "Les silvains," and a version for solo guitar of the sarabande from the sonata by Senaillé. Henricksen played both elegantly, with just the right sort of subtle pauses at the ends of phrases in the sarabande that make French Baroque music expressive without being histrionic.

Works by Barbara Strozzi and others, performed by La Donna Musicale (May 18, 2013)

I came to Friday night's concert by La Donna Musicale hoping to hear some unfamiliar music. I did, although I'm afraid that what I heard did not add up to a particularly interesting or even a coherent program. The first half of the program, titled "Shades of Death and Alleluia," consisted of chiefly vocal works by seventeenth-century composers. The second comprised mostly recent compositions, two of them serious, but it trailed off into a series of arrangements that were at best entertaining. The program, first presented on May 17, will be repeated May 18 in Lindsey Chapel at Emmanuel Church, Boston.

La Donna Musicale, founded and directed by viola da gambist Laury Gutierrez, specializes in Baroque music by women composers, of whom about eight were represented on this program. The most famous of these, the Venetian composer Barbara Strozzi, provided the two opening works, taken from her rarely heard first publication, a book of madrigals issued in 1644. Modeled on the late madrigals of Monteverdi, these were sung capably by Camila Parias, Daniela Tosic, and Harris Ipock. Yet the acoustics of First Church, Cambridge, where the concert took place, played havoc with the projection of the words, as was true throughout the evening. Only occasionally did Strozzi's careful musical rhetoric come across, although in the second work, the sonnet "L'amante modesto," the failure to project the words with full intensity must also be attributed to the decision to substitute viola da gambas for two of the five original vocal parts.

Gutierrez, in spoken remarks that alternated with the music, repeatedly referred to the free substitution of voices by instruments, which she said was a common Baroque practice. Perhaps it was—but it is not always a desirable one. Here, as in the closing work on the first half of the program, a Magnificat by Isabella Leonarda, the lack of a vocal ensemble adequate to the music rather weakened the effect.

Leonarda, like Strozzi, was a prolific seventeenth-century Italian composer of vocal music, but there the parallels end. Strozzi may not have officially been a courtesan, but she was no nun, unlike Leonarda and several other composers on the program. More to the point, Strozzi was a brilliant and imaginative composer, whereas Leonarda's Magnificat, as well as a trio sonata that preceded it, are relatively conventional pieces. They were not helped by fairly workaday performances. Yet Leonarda's music surpasses the pedestrian works offered by several other composers, including Vittoria and Raffaella Aleotti. These, despite the different dates given for them in the program were probably different names for the same person, before and after she entered a convent. The problem with performing music by Aleotti, or that of Chiara Cozzolani and Isabella Vizzana, is that compositions which barely rise above the level of student work can hardly inspire either performers or audiences, at least when performed without the type of improvisational vocal virtuosity that was expected in the seventeenth century but was in short supply tonight.

Leonarda's sonata, played with flute replacing one of the two original violin parts, gained some needed color from this admittedly anachronistic instrumentation. Yet constant tampering with instrumentation was a distraction throughout the evening, not only in the fashionable use of a small continuo "orchestra" but in the continual switching between bowed and pizzicato playing by the viola da gamba. Perhaps the latter was meant to imitate the sound of a lute, but as in so many modern performance of early music, the unhistorical expansion of the continuo accompaniment, originally limited to a single plucked instrument or keyboard, is a contemporary equivalent of Respighi's or Stokowski's overblown orchestrations of old classics.

For this listener the most interesting music came at the opening of the second half, which began with a brief "Elegy and Passacaglia" by the Georgia composer Martha Bishop. According to a program note,

the 1987 work was composed in memory of Leo Traynor, an American officer who helped found the Viola da Gamba Society of Japan after World War II and was an advocate of new music for this old instrument. (The present reviewer once served on the jury for the Leo M. Traynor Composition Competition for new music for viols.) Scored for viola (the regular type) and two gambas, the work alludes to but by no means imitates seventeenth-century chamber music. The Elegy makes effective use of its rather dour instrumentation in sonorous, mildly dissonant chords. The Passacaglia, written over a recurring chromatic bass line, seems a bit more derivative; certainly it is more clearly tonal.

It was unclear from the information provided when Ruth Lomon composed her six “Songs From a Requiem” or how the arrangement heard tonight is related to a 1982 version for voice and piano. Sung beautifully by male soprano Robert Crowe with an ensemble of Baroque flute and strings, the music is an attractive essay in what might be called post-expressionism, occasionally reminiscent of Schoenberg or Webern and certainly sharing their concision. Long associated with Brandeis University, the composer is also the author of the six poems set here. These border on the pretentious, but the settings do not, and their predominantly quiet chamber-music character was well suited to the “early” instruments heard tonight. These were well played, despite their being used in an idiom that is much more at home on “modern” instruments.

Guttierez described the final segment of the program as a “sneak preview” of what will apparently be a concert for children. Indeed, the audience, who appeared mostly to be well over fifty, was invited to play the role of children by making percussion sounds during the final offering. This reviewer recalls once being asked to do much the same as a child, while attending a concert performance of Leopold Mozart's “Toy” Symphony, and finding it just as distasteful then as now. Is it curmudgeonly to object that, however entertaining some may find this sort of audience participation, it is out of place on a program that promised a serious exploration of neglected music? It did not help that Diana Sáez's concluding “Plena” was, to these ears, a repetitive and rather tame take-off on a type of Puerto Rican traditional song.

Possibly the last few selections would have made a stronger impression had they been accompanied by clearer descriptions and a clearer explanation of how they fit into the program as a whole. Alas, the off-the-cuff verbal remarks were not as helpful as they might have been. A comment about the program booklet is in order, too. While grateful for the inclusion of all the vocal texts, with translations, one could hardly have guessed from its faulty layout that the second of the poems set by Strozzi was a sonnet—an important consideration, given the faithfulness with which her music reflects the form of the poem.

Is there still a need for concerts such as this one: a grab-bag of music that happens to be (mostly) by women, performed by an ensemble that is neither precisely historical nor entirely adequate for most of it? At least the music of Strozzi and Leonarda merits more focused attention than it received here It would be a shame if listeners went away thinking that these two are merely members of a group of composers whose works were performed tonight because they happened to have been women.

Renaissance choral music performed by Stile Antico (Apr. 6, 2013)

Stile Antico Performs “Treasures of the Renaissance: Masterpieces From the Golden Age of Choral Music”

Stile Antico, the British choral group, presented the final concert in the Boston Early Music Festival's 2012–13 season last Friday night at Cambridge's St. Paul Catholic Church in Harvard Square. Comprising twelve mixed voices—six men and six women—the relatively new group is already the heir apparent to the Tallis Scholars, for decades the Festival's favored visiting vocal ensemble from Britain (both groups are booked to return next year).

Unlike the Tallis Scholars, directed since their inception by Peter Phillips, Stile Antico make a point of having no conductor. In performance and in their publicity materials they avoid any indication of following a single leader, all twelve members standing in a semicircle open to the audience and following cues given discretely by one of the group.

Vocally, Stile Antico take a distinct approach as well, eschewing use of the high male voice—the so-called countertenor or male alto—that has been long associated with the English choral tradition. (The Tallis Scholars, by contrast, typically employ both female and male voices on alto parts.) Although most members of the group have been and continue to be involved in Anglican music making, Stile Antico's basic sound stands at some distance from that of the twentieth-century British choral tradition. Without adopting a “modern” or operatic approach, they apply a a full-voiced manner to most works, avoiding any suggestion that they might be emulating the sound of a conventional Anglican cathedral choir, with its boy (and girl) sopranos and male falsetto altos.

Friday's program was, as one of the members put it in brief remarks, “a guided tour of Renaissance sacred music.” More precisely, it comprised favorite selections from three or four of the major traditions of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century sacred music—twelve Flemish, Italian, Spanish, and English works—together with one German composition and a new work by the contemporary English composer John McCabe.

This last work, commissioned for Stile Antico and first performed in 2009, was for this listener the highlight of the program. Set to an English passion text previously used by the Tudor composer William Cornysh (d. 1523), “Woefully arrayed” is characteristic of McCabe's music in echoing older music from the Renaissance to neoclassical Stravinsky, while incorporating distinctive and sometimes arresting new timbres. Here the opening words (referring to Jesus on the cross) serve as a refrain, set in sustained sonorities that initially correspond with familiar chords but which shade in and out of tonality as the work progresses. Contrasting sharply with this are dissonant, staccato outbursts on such phrases as “with whips sore fretted.” This was perhaps the best-sung work on the program, utterly sure in every matter of pitch, dynamics, and ensemble. Falling at the end of the first half, it was met with sustained applause—an indication that this early-music audience was completely receptive to the inclusion of new music on such a program.

No other work made an equally strong impact, at least on this listener. One problem with this sort of program is that, in hearing a series of varied works rarely more than five minutes in length, one never has a chance to become completely absorbed in the details of a particular composer's style or approach. Nor, given the particular ordering of the works on this program, was there an obvious logic or coherence to the evening's choices, other than a tendency to favor settings from the Song of Songs. These provided texts for five works, two of them setting the verses that begin “Veni, dilecte mi”

(Come, my beloved). It didn't help, however, that most works were sung by the full ensemble of twelve voices, regardless of the number of distinct vocal parts. Hence, despite the breadth of variety in compositional styles, there was not a huge variety in actual sound.

Theirs is, fortunately, a very good basic sound. Particularly in the last work, a polychoral twelve-part "Tota pulchra es," the one-voice-on-a-part performance resonated so beautifully in the large space that one hardly missed the organ and other instruments that probably accompanied this work's original performances. Composed by the Hamburg organist Hieronymus Praetorius (not the better known Michael Praetorius), the work incorporates the slightly pedantic musical rhetoric that was favored by German imitators of Gabrieli and other Italian composers. It nevertheless received a very fine performance, as did Tomkins's "O praise the lord," which opened the second half. Both are as much "Baroque" as "Renaissance" works, as we understand those terms, and as such particularly suited to the forthright approach that Stile Antico adopted here.

I was not equally convinced by their approach in other works. It was good to hear the Magnificat of the First Tone by Nicolas Gombert, the first and longest work on the program. Alternating between verses sung in chant and in polyphony, it represents the generation of composers between Josquin and Palestrina. Their music, focusing on contrapuntal dexterity, lacks the more obvious virtuosity of their predecessors and the musical rhetoric of their successors, and it therefore is less often performed. I didn't feel that this performance brought Gombert's counterpoint to life, and I felt the same in "Ego flos campi" by Gombert's contemporary Jacob Clement (known as Clemens non papa). Though sung beautifully, it was simply too slow, and instead of lines I heard chiefly a succession of resonant sonorities.

I had similar mixed feelings about other performances, such as that of "Veni dilecte mi" by Orlande de Lassus. Perhaps it was due to the doubling of voices—all twelve to sing a five-part work—that this work's sensuously entwining melodic lines sounded a bit too literal, too strictly measured, lacking the freedom that might come from use of a single voice on each part. Nor did the powerful choral sound quite match the lively yet intimate character of the music and the text. (Here, incidentally, I found it a bit off-putting to be told, in spoken remarks, that the Song of Songs comes from the Old Testament, without acknowledgement that Christian writers are not the only ones who have pondered the theological questions raised by this love poetry from the Hebrew Bible.)

Stile Antico's approach certainly worked in William Byrd's "Vigilate." The Advent text is the basis of one of the Elizabethan composer's "most dramatic motets," as bass Matthew O'Donovan put it in his fine program notes. He might have added that this work avoids the over-extended length of some of the other relatively early compositions that were issued alongside it in the composer's 1589 publication *Cantiones sacrae* (Sacred Songs). The sharp dynamic contrasts and staccato articulation of this performance were too aggressive for my taste—and could not have been used in the work's first, secret performances in aristocratic Catholic households during the reign of Elizabeth I. But although distracting attention from the more thoughtful aspects of Byrd's setting, they certainly did produce a dramatic reading of the text.

Other works, although equally well sung, made less of an impression on this listener. Another "Veni dilecti mi," by Sebastián de Vivanco, includes some typically Spanish rhythmic play early on but thereafter lost intensity, at least in this performance, despite its lively double-chorus setting. A four-part "Hortus conclusus" by the little-known Andalusian composer Rodrigo de Ceballos also proved rather non-descript, although it might not have been helped by coming toward the end of a fairly packed program. Also performed were John Sheppard's setting of the Lord's Prayer, Gibbons's "O clap your

hands," an "Exultate Deo" by Palestrina, and Victoria's "O magnum mysterium." Thomas Tallis was represented by "In pace" as well as by his setting of St. Thomas Aquinas's "O sacrum convivium," which served as an encore piece.

A word about the "pre-concert talk" that preceded the performance: Given that two thirds of the concert's forty-eight-page program booklet was devoted to marketing or fund-raising in one form or another, it may be no surprise that the first two of the three pre-concert speakers devoted their remarks to enthusiastic descriptions of Stile Antico's current CDs and performance tours. Such comments may create a bond with certain members of the audience, perhaps narrowing the distance that allegedly separates some listeners away from "classical" music. Yet those hoping to learn something about the actual music on the program had to wait for what turned out to be some disappointingly superficial historical background, delivered none too clearly and without illustrations in the church's somewhat echoey acoustic.

I was glad to be reminded through these remarks that some of this music was written not for public services in large buildings but for private domestic performance—a point that, however, applied above all to the work by Byrd, which was nevertheless performed in a notably "public" manner. I am glad too that BEMF continues to include notes as well as complete texts and translations of vocal works in its program booklets, even if the latter must also remind us of the benefactors who have underwritten individual concerts and talks, and if marketing logos must be strewn alongside the names of the actual performers who also have some role in making these events possible. Still, I hope that the presenters of such events will keep in mind that a good talk by an informed and lively speaker, especially one illustrated by live or recorded music examples, can meaningfully further an organization's educational mission—and might also serve as no less effective marketing than a performance as good and committed as this one was.

Songs by Lazar Weiner, performance directed by Yehudi Wyner (Mar. 5, 2012)

“The Yiddish Art Songs of Lazar Weiner” were the subjects of a program at Boston's Old South Meeting House on Sunday afternoon (March 4, 2012). Weiner, who died thirty years ago, is probably best known in the Boston area as the father of distinguished composer and pianist Yehudi Wyner. The latter, who directed the concert from the piano, was joined by five singers who clearly are expert in this repertory. The performance, part of the Third Annual Boston Jewish Music Festival, was supported by Hebrew College and the Aaron Copland Fund for Music.

The elder Weiner, born in 1897 in Ukraine, emigrated to the U.S. in 1914. For many years director of music at New York's Central Synagogue, he composed chamber music, an opera, and music for the Yiddish theater. But his art songs “lie at the heart of his work” and are his “deepest and most authentic expression,” as his son put it in spoken remarks at the beginning of the concert.

These are, in other words, lieder—not folksongs and not musical theater songs, although elements of both could be heard in a few of the selections. Composed during seven decades, from 1918 to 1977, the songs heard Sunday afternoon are predominantly in an idiom which, although conservative and essentially tonal, could have been written only in the twentieth century. Reminiscent at times of Debussy, and especially of Musorgsky—whose influence on his father has been noted by Yehudi Wyner—they might be described as post-Romantic, although some also incorporate occasional suggestions of the free atonal music of Schoenberg.

These songs are not easy for performer or listener. Even the few that open with references to folk or theatrical genres evolve quickly into something less straightforward, more complex. Although the poems are mostly strophic, the music is almost entirely through-composed, rarely repeating itself for successive verses. Many, such as the 1936 setting of H. Rosenblatt's “Der Held” (The Hero), end suddenly, with an unexpected twist. In this case the broken-off ending reflects the ironic question at the end of the poem, about a war veteran reduced to begging: “Is a shower of pennies in my cup enough?” It was sung powerfully by baritone David Kravitz, whose huge voice was particularly well suited for this selection.

“Der Held” was one of only two songs performed Sanday that are not also included on a 2006 CD from Naxos (*Lazar Weiner: The Art of Yiddish Song*). There Yehudi Wyner accompanies a group of singers that include Robert Abelson, also heard Sunday, as well as his wife Susan Davenny-Wyner. The CD booklet may contain the most thorough published discussion of Lazar Weiner's life and music, providing extensive commentary on the songs and their texts.

The latter, all drawn from twentieth-century Yiddish poets, are prevailingly serious, as in a set of three by Abraham Joshua Heschel which were sung Sunday and are also recorded on the CD. As Yehudi Wyner noted, these are concerned with the relationship of man to God. Composed in 1973, they conclude with the nearly atonal “Got un mentsh” (God and Mankind), which struck me as one of the most imaginative of the songs. They were sung ably by tenor Joshua Breitzer, but here as in many other songs it was Yehudi Wyner's piano playing that really caught my attention.

This was not because of any inappropriate histrionics from the pianist. On the contrary, the playing was invariably sensitive to the music and to the singers. But Lazar Weiner makes the piano at least an equal partner in his songs. Some, such as the 1936 “Ergets vayt” (Somewhere far off)—which, we were told, was sung as solace by prisoners in the gulag—combine a relatively simple melody with a much more complex piano part.

It was therefore a particular pleasure to hear three of Lazar Weiner's solo piano pieces. These included two from a set of five entitled "Calculations," composed in 1931–3 when Weiner was studying with the numerically obsessed pedagogue Joseph Schillinger. Yehudi Wyner's playing here was as beautiful (and as virtuosic) as I have ever heard him. In the two "Calculations," the inspired harping on one or two recurring chords or scales reminded me somewhat of Scriabin. A third piece—composed for Yehudi when he was two!—comprised a central lyrical section vaguely reminiscent of Ravel, framed by quicker outer passages full of very delicately played filigree.

As explained in the notes for the CD, Lazar Weiner's songs strictly follow an ethos of respect for the poetry, avoiding repetitions of words or extended passages for the piano. As a result, they are short but highly changeable in character, sometimes rising from quiet to surprising intensity within a few short lines.

The baritone Robert Abelson, whom Yehudi Wyner described as a colleague and student of his father, demonstrated this changeability in the two latest songs on the program, especially "Yidn zingen in di bunkers: Ani mamin" (The Jews in the bunkers sing: I believe) from 1977. Abelson's singing here was not as flawless as in the 1992 performance recorded on the CD. But it must have been, as Yehudi Wyner described it, "an authentic picture of what my father had in mind." The large audience was clearly moved by this dark song, which nevertheless ends with at least a suggestion of brightness.

I was less enthusiastic about several songs which, drawing on idioms familiar from Yiddish musical theater, avoid the banality of Broadway but never quite achieve real lightness. More successful and imaginative, I think, were two brief "Humoresques" from 1965 and the quiet "Ovntlid" (Evening Song) from 1968, sung with appropriate soft humor by soprano Ilana Davidson. Mezzo-soprano Lynn Torgrove was especially lyrical in the early "Shtile tener" (Quiet tones) from 1918.

A word about the venue: Old South Meeting House was probably not the best place for this program, with its inopportunely placed pews (many facing in the wrong direction) and creaky wooden floors. Constant comings and goings, as well as picture-taking, during the performances did not make it easy to hear all the words. This was especially true in the back, close to the "museum" displays, where this reviewer was forced to sit.

This music deserves concert performances under more professional circumstances. The language should not deter singers; it's essentially modern German with occasional Hebrew words. (The poems are transliterated phonetically in the CD booklet; it is regrettable that only translations were included in the concert program.) Never pretentious or overbearing, Wyner's songs are a neglected but significant strand of twentieth-century European-American music. His unique accomplishment deserves wider recognition.

Haydn and Beethoven symphonies performed by the Handel and Haydn Society (Feb. 18, 2012)

The Montréal-based conductor Jean-Marie Zeitouni led Boston's Handel and Haydn Society Orchestra Friday night (Feb. 17, 2011) at Symphony Hall in a program of music by Haydn and Beethoven. In fact the concert, which will be repeated Sunday, opened with a performance of the Gloria from Mozart's "Coronation" Mass K. 317. The latter, "in celebration of the twenty-fifth annversary of Collaborative Youth Concerts," included soloists Teresa Wakim, Carrie Cheron, Christian Figueroa, and RaShaun Campbell. But as it was led by associate conductor John Finney, chorusmaster of the Society, and involved student singers from Boston Latin School, Brockton High School, the O'Bryant School of Math and Science in Roxbury, and Lawrence High School—and only a subset of the Handel and Haydn players—I shall limit comment on it to a few words at the end of this review.

The main events were Beethoven's *Egmont* Overture and "Eroica" Symphony, bookending Haydn's Symphony no. 48 in C, known as the "Maria Theresia." I happen to have grown up listening to Max Goberman's pioneering recordings of Haydn's earlier symphonies with the Vienna State Opera Orchestra, including this one. The LPs, recorded before Goberman's death in 1962, came with scores bound in. There were few other such examples available in the public library of the suburb of Albany, N.Y., where I grew up, and thus I came to know Haydn's earlier symphonies quite well.

Among them are many extraordinary works, still under-valued, but I am not sure that no. 48, now heard with some frequency, is one of them. It is certainly memorable for its catchy opening and the brilliant concertante writing for oboes and high horns in C. But the energy of the first movement repeatedly dissolves into discursive digressions of a type that Haydn later learned to avoid. Similar things occur in the second and third movements as well, all potentially expressive or rhetorical, but also potentially tiresome as they occur within passages that are heard multiple times. Although the last movement maintains its energy unbroken, its use of a so-called premature reprise means that one hears its comic-opera main theme perhaps a bit too often.

Symphonies of this type probably work best when played by the chamber-sized orchestra for which Haydn was probably writing around 1770, when he produced this piece for his Hungarian patron Count Nikolaus Esterhàzy. Even if this symphony really was composed for a festive visit by the Austrian empress Maria Theresia, as is commonly supposed, it is probably served better by a smaller ensemble than the one heard Friday night. Three rather than eight first violins on a part would not need a conductor to lead them in the long digressions; those in the second movement might have been rendered more freely or spontaneously if they could have been shaped by guest concertmaster Christina Day Martinson, playing as a quasi-soloist with two colleagues following her lead.

Zeitouni's direction in the second movement was not inexpressive, but it necessarily tended to subdivide the long beats of this Adagio, which consequently seemed longer than it really was. There is always something wrong when you begin to hope that the performers will skip some of the repetitions in a piece. The fault may lie partly with the composer, but I was glad when the second half of the Adagio was not repeated (as called for in the score), despite some lovely playing from the oboes and horns. This movement might have been aided by a slightly quicker tempo on the whole; the quick movements, on the other hand, might have been more meaningful had they been played slightly less exuberantly. Doing so could have given them a chance to breathe, allowing the players more opportunity to articulate the individual gestures of the music.

Beethoven's overture for Goethe's tragedy *Egmont* was better suited to the relatively large period-instrument ensemble used here, including no fewer than three violoni or double basses. Zeitouni, in a

brief “conductor's note” in the program booklet, pointed out Beethoven's use here of four horns, in place of the tne-customary two. Indeed the horns, together with the clarinets and bassoons, produced some marvelous dark sonorities in the relatively few passages where all four play together. (Much of the time, as in other Classical works for so-called natural horns, the instruments alternate, two of them producing notes of one scale and two of them those of another.) These sounds, which could not have been produced by “modern” instruments, demonstrate how imaginatively Beethoven composed for the instruments of his time—although by 1809–10, when he wrote this music, he probably could no longer hear them. Nevertheless, as in the Haydn symphony, I felt that this was a fairly conventional interpretation, and, as in most performances of this piece, the rather sudden transition from the prevailing dark F minor to a triumphant F major for the brief coda did not seem quite convincing.

The “Eroica” was another story. This was the cleanest and most satisfyingly straightforward live performance of Beethoven's Third Symphony that I've heard, including one by the “Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique” led by John Eliot Gardiner last October at Carnegie Hall in New York. Needless to say, this performance also was considerably more transparent than the Mahler re-orchestration played in the same hall a year earlier by the Baltimore Symphony under Marin Alsop.

The press kit conveniently furnished to your reviewer included an offprint of Jeremy Eichler's *Globe* review of Sept. 24, 2011. This mentioned that under present artistic director Harry Christophers the Handel and Haydn Orchestra is cultivating a “lighter, leaner” sound “in line with stylish European early music ensembles.” I couldn't say whether what I heard Friday night should be described in this way. But I've been impressed by the much improved ensemble and precision of the strings in recent outings, particularly in the more difficult items on certain programs. The “Eroica” certainly counts as one of these.

Here Zeitouni demonstrated nice control and shaping of, for example, the grand fanfare-like ending of the central “maggiore” section in the second movement Funeral March. The principal winds on the whole played splendidly, oboist Stephen Hammer producing fine work in the Beethoven as in the Haydn symphony, and Eric Hoeprich providing a lyrical first clarinet throughout the “Eroica.” The horns, led by Richard Menaul, significantly improved their fielding percentage for the evening in this work, sounding very good in the famous section solos of the trio. (Zeitouni, in his note, claimed that the “Eroica” was the first symphony to call for three horns, but Vanhal is supposed to have done so in his A-minor symphony of *ca.* 1777; I have not seen or heard it.)

I felt that the fugue-like passage within the “minore” section of the second movement was allowed to rush ever so slightly, thereby losing some of its intensity. And the third movement scherzo as usual started too fast, perhaps also too quietly to be heard clearly out past the first few rows of seats in the hall, although it came into focus soon enough. The performance of the first variation in the final movement by soloists instead of the full string section—a departure from Beethoven's score that one hears from time to time, perhaps suggested by another variation passage in his Choral Fantasia that is actually written this way—was too clean and elegant to draw any objections from this listener. But it is hard for any performerance to maintain the requisite unbroken concentration (or intonation) throughout this sprawling movement. Although it was well played—with some impressive passagework from principal flutist Christopher Krueger—perhaps this huge symphony was not placed most effectively at the end of a longer-than-usual program.

The Mozart Mss movement that opened the evening was, as John Finney told the audience before conducting it, a “preview”of the complete performance scheduled for April 27 and 29 (with the regular Handel and Haydn chorus). The reduced orchestral forces adequately supported the sixty or so student

singers, and Teresa Wakim's clear soprano sounded beautifully above the other soloists (Susan Consoli will sing in her place Sunday). It would be oafish to complain that one could tell who had a kid singing onstage by observing which members of the audience stood up as soon as the last Amen was sung.

Medieval vocal works performed by Anonymous 4 (Jan. 31, 2012)

Anonymous 4, the vocal quartet specializing in medieval European music, performed at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's new Calderwood Concert Hall on Sunday, Jan. 28, 2012. Their program, called "Anthology 25," comprised one item from each of their 23 CDs, plus three recent compositions, one of them a new work by David Lang

Scholars have long used the designation "Anonymous IV" for the unidentified author of a thirteenth-century music treatise. An important source of information about music in medieval Paris, it happened to be the fourth in a series of anonymous writings included in an eighteenth-century publication. Hence the name of the group is a learned pun, and a fitting one given the group's repertory and make-up. Much of what they perform is preserved anonymously, in manuscripts whose scribes are also unidentified. Founded in 1986, the group comprises Ruth Cunningham, Marsha Genensky, Susan Hellauer, and Jacqueline Horner-Kwiatek (who replaced Johanna Maria Rose).

According to the group's website (http://www.anonymous4.com), the program performed on Sunday has been taken on tour to celebrate their twenty-fifth anniversary. It comprises six sets of two to six works each, on themes such as "Legends," "Sisterhood," and "Ardor." A cynic might see this program in the same vein as pop-music concerts that are essentially marketing for CDs (or music downloads). Indeed, the rather artificial headings for the sets did not entirely hide the essentially arbitrary character of the one-item-per-CD format.

Yet to this listener the program, which lasted a little over an hour (without intermission), was in no way a jumble. This was so despite the fact that the thematic organization largely ignored chronology and style. For instance, it juxtaposed a chanted Marian antiphon from medieval England ("Quae est ista?") with the new work by Lang. Yet by the end of the program I was beginning to feel that I had heard perhaps a bit too much of the same thing. The styles were diverse, yet slow tempos and the singers' generally reserved approach to nearly all the selections made for limited variety of actual sound, however lovely.

I hasten to add that the group's generally quiet approach seems to me entirely appropriate to most of this repertory. Their way of singing it highlighted connections between the medieval and the contemporary numbers on the program. David Lang's engaging "the wood and the vine"—no capital letters in this title or in that of the larger work, "love fail," of which it is a part—made much of a three-note melodic formula common in so-called Gregorian chant. Lang's musical language, which combines elements of neo-Classical Stravinsky and New York minimalism, seemed not entirely unlike the moderately dissonant idiom of a polyphonic conductus and a carol, both from medieval England, that preceded it on the program.

The two other recent works were broadly similar to Lang's. A sustained, largely consonant setting of the Lord's Prayer by the British composer John Tavener (performed in Anonymous 4's own arrangement) contained echoes of both medieval conductus and an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century English hymn. More interesting to this reviewer was "The Scientist," a movement from Richard Einhorn's *A Carnival of Miracles*. The scientist in question is Galileo, whose supposed statement *Eppur si muove* ("but it does move," referring to the earth) forms the sole text. Starting in unison, the four voices repeat the three Italian words over and over. They gradually diverge from one another, introducing increasingly complex musical ideas. The roughly five-minute work concluded with what was probably the most forceful singing on the program, although still restrained by the standards of mainstream concert performance.

The minimalist elements here and in the Lang composition, together with several folk works on the program, exemplify the crossover between classical and vernacular music that has been a recurring theme in the work of Anonymous 4. In this they resemble several equally eclectic ensembles that have achieved comparable success in recent decades; the Kronos Quartet comes to mind. Like Kronos, Anonymous 4 include their own arrangements—here of folksongs and hymns—in their concerts and recordings. But they take care to identify them as such in their program booklets, which are unfailingly generous in the amount of information they provide about their often esoteric selections. Not for them is the vague mix of folk, medieval, and "world" music that has become increasingly fashionable in early-music performance during the past two decades. To be sure, the popularity of that sort of programming helps explain their own commercial success.

There is also, of course, a feminist element in what they do. In Sunday's program it was evident in the inclusion of two chants by Hildegard of Bingen, a German twelfth-century abbess who was one of the few medieval women composers who are identified by name. How much of the surviving medieval repertory was ever sung by women remains an open question. But its appropriation by four modern female musicians was probably a less momentous decision than the one to forego the instrumental accompaniment that twenty-five years ago was still practically required for early-music groups.

Scholarly opinion about historical practice already favored "a cappella" presentation of most of this repertory when Anonymous 4 began performing. But their decision to eschew instruments also melded happily with notions about the purity of unaccompanied voices, in music that is prevailingly sacred and frequently concerned with Mary and other female virgin saints. Of course, this manner of performance also meshes nicely with the type of folk singing that we think of as unspoiled and authentic because it is done without amplified or electric instruments, or with none at all. Marsha Gerensky offered an example in "You fair and pretty ladies," sung alone in what seemed to these ears a fine imitation of southern Appalachian country singing.

Yet two other American songs, including Robert Lowry's nineteenth-century hymn "Shall we gather at the river," did not sound so very different from some of the medieval ones. One reason is that most were done so slowly. The American composer Charles Ives, who made his own idiosyncratic arrangement of this song for solo voice and piano, marked it Allegretto (moderately quick). The more traditional four-part harmonization sung on Sunday, although pretty, was practically funereal in character.

To be sure, the group has lost none of the pure intonation and precise diction, rhythm, and ensemble that have marked its performances from the beginning. But even Francesco Landini's fourteenth-century ballata "Echo la primavera," whose refrain has some catchy rhythms typical of this virtuoso late-medieval Italian genre, would have needed more speed to invoke the "dancelike gestures" mentioned in the notes. The booklet duly reported that Hildegard's chants are sometimes remarkably ornate, requiring virtuoso singers. But the two relatively brief examples chosen for this concert did not really bear out this side of her work.

I also was not entirely convinced by the approach taken to the ornate upper line of the twelfth-century Spanish or Aquitanian verse "Gratulantes celebremus festum." This was sung in a way that was perhaps meant to sound like north-African or Andalusian folk singing. The result, however, struck me as harsh, reminiscent of the so-called open-throated technique made famous a while ago by The Bulgarian Women's Choir.

These, however, are minor complaints. Perhaps because of the brevity of most of the medieval selections, and the fundmantal similarity in sound of so many of them, no one item stood out as particularly striking in a program of many well-sung pieces. I certainly enjoyed the thirteenth-century three-voice French Christmas conductus “Nicholai presulis,” although what the booklet meant in describing it as “quirky” was unclear to me—perhaps referring to a few mildly crunchy dissonances and a long melisma on “Nunc” (“now”). Two or three decades ago the mention of instruments in the last two lines of the poem probably would have elicited some sort of orchestration from most medieval specialists. It is a mark of how far early music has come that no one misses instruments when the singing is as clear and assured as this.

As this was the first concert of this type to take place in the Calderwood hall, a word about the sound is in order. David Griesinger has just written a close-to-rave review of the hall itself for this publication (see http://classical-scene.com/2012/01/11/calderwood-hall-at-isgm/). His report, however, seems to have been on the basis of hearing a rehearsal by a large instrumental chamber group playing new music. I had no difficulty hearing one to four unaccompanied voices singing mostly quiet medieval songs. But this may have been because I was only about twenty feet away from them, in a corner of the ground floor that was reserved for the press.

Because the hall was nearly full for Sunday's performance and there was no intermission, I didn't have the opportunity to try out the sound in other locations. It was certainly dry, although not unpleasantly so. There was, perhaps, a certain historical aptness in the placement of the performers at the center of what was essentially an enclosed rectangular court. But only a fraction of this music is likely to have been originally performed in courtyards, and I would not have been happy to have been seated behind the four singers (who faced in my direction the entire time).

Although never histrionic, Anonmous 4's singing is enriched by gesture, which has to be seen. Probably none of their music was meant to sound as if emanating from disembodied voices, however much one might like that romantic concept. Most of this program involved music whose poetry tells stories, whether in Latin, French, English, or Irish. One misses something of its conversational or presentational character if one cannot see the singers breathing and forming the sounds orally. I wonder, too, how much the hall's ambience (or lack thereof) contributed to my sense of sonic sameness. Perhaps the inflections of dynamics and color that barely registered for me would have been easier to make out in a more conventionally resonant hall. Surely it will be advisable to consider adjusting the hall's acoustic as it sees further offerings of various types.

Works of Purcell, The English Concert with countertenor Andreas Scholl (Oct. 25, 2011)

Jordan Hall saw a performance Sunday night (Oct. 23) by The English Concert, the London-based period-instrument chamber orchestra. Directed by Harry Bicket, who also played harpsichord and organ, the ensemble was joined by German falsetto singer Andreas Scholl in a program of music from the late seventeenth century, mostly by the English composer Henry Purcell.

Seventeenth-century music has been in vogue for some time among early-music specialists, and virtuoso instrumental pieces from early-Baroque Italy, not to mention operas by Monteverdi and Cavalli, have received particular attention—not least from the Boston Early Music Festival, which was a co-sponsor of Sunday's performance together with the Celebrity Series of Boston. Purcell's music is less obviously attention-grabbing than that of his Italian predecessors, but it is on the whole more finely crafted and harmonically more adventurous. It has long been popular with local early-music enthusiasts, although I suspect that its appeal for much of Sunday's audience lay more in nostalgia than in anything exceptional that was actually heard. The program consisted largely of old chestnuts, performed in a manner that was surprisingly old-fashioned in certain ways, despite the incorporation of a few “new” early-music touches.

The English Concert has never been known as an innovator in the early-music world. Founded and for many years directed by harpsichordist Trevor Pinnock, they were led for just a few years by the sometimes outlandishly imaginative violin virtuoso Andrew Manze before Bicket took over in 2007. Pinnock was not a practicing musicologist in the way Christopher Hogwood, for example, has been. The English Concert made its name more through solid performances of late-Baroque favorites than by exploring sometimes unfamiliar music and performing practices, as Hogwood did as music director of Boston's Handel and Haydn Society. Bicket appears to be continuing in Pinnock's tradition.

Sunday's program was intelligently constructed. Each half comprised excerpts from one of Purcell's major vocal works, preceded by an instrumental piece by one of his German contemporaries. The main works were *King Arthur* and *The Fairy Queen*, prime examples of a type of late-seventeenth-century English drama (“semi-opera”) that gets low marks from Shakespeare scholars—*The Fairy Queen* is a free adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—but whose entertaining masque scenes and colorful minor characters inspired Purcell to write some wonderful music.

One example is the famous “Cold” scene from *King Arthur*, sung by an allegorical divinity whose power to freeze the earth ends when Cupid magically raises him up to the surface from underground. In the original work, the Cold Genius is a comic bass. Scholl's greatest strength lies in his engaging stage presence; here his theatrical sense was clear (despite the absence of any actual staging) in his gestures and in a convincing half singing, half stage-whisper delivery, voice and strings together providing a musical depiction of quiet shivering.

But this simply is not a role for an alto falsetto singer, nor did the one-on-a-part band of two violins, viola, and basso continuo (more on that in a moment) convey the effect of Purcell's music, which is grave and funny at the same time. This performance was merely peculiar, the violins at times producing quiet buzzing sounds rather than clear pitches. Local audiences saw the scene done more convincingly when BEMF staged *King Arthur* in a memorable 1995 performance.

Of course this was a concert, not a theatrical production. Scholl's unselfish approach as soloist was evident in his willingness to remain onstage, seated, during the many instrumental selections. These included some of the most famous music from both Purcell works. I was most impressed, however, by

the playing in the Passacaglia from Sonata V in Georg Muffat's *Armonico Tributo* of 1682. Long enough to stand on its own, this movement is almost as much an early-music standard as the Purcell selections, having been recorded already in the early 1960s by Nikolaus Harononcourt and the Concentus Musicus Vienna.

Like Harnoncourt in that pioneering venture, The English Concert opted most of the time for a smooth, legato approach to this grand, imposing piece. But they played with greater attention to Muffat's sophisticated phrasing and chromatic harmony, especially in an expressive minor-key section. And they produced an impressive effect in a passage near the middle of the piece, where the flowing music of the opening, played on Sunday by first violinist Matthew Truscott, returns to a more energetic, heavily accented accompaniment in the lower strings. The effect is almost reminiscent of music by the contemporary American composer Elliott Carter in juxtaposing two so different styles of rhythm and articulation.

On the whole, however, The English Concert played with a sweet, singing sound of the type favored by "modern" (as opposed to "period") players, without the sharper articulation that characterizes a number of the more youthful early-music ensembles today. This was in line with Scholl's approach to the vocal numbers, which was equally smooth, at times also understated. By and large, this approach was appropriate to the vocal selections. These tended toward the contemplative, avoiding anything showy or virtuoso, although Scholl showed himself perfectly capable of clearly articulated coloratura at moments in his opening "Sweeter than roses." Even here, however, a bit more fire might have been expected, such as I recall in the wonderful recording made by the American singer Russell Oberlin more than half a century ago.

Oberlin, however, was not a falsettist, rather a very high tenor. This raises a somewhat touchy issue, for Scholl's designation as a "countertenor" is in fact a misnomer. The word, although now generally used to refer to an adult male falsetto singer, originally meant something quite different (as explained in notes by Scott Metcalfe for a recent Blue Heron concert, online here). The English singer Alfred Deller popularized the current usage during the mid-twentieth century, becoming particularly famous for his singing of Purcell's songs, which probably were not meant for falsetto singers.

I mention this because listeners at this concert could be forgiven for supposing that a performance by an alto falsettist and a "period orchestra" might bear a reasonable similarity to something Purcell and his audiences could have heard. But the theatrical songs that dominated Sunday's concert are especially unlikely to have been sung regularly by falsetto singers, least of all ones with voices as delicate as Scholl's, which at times was barely audible over the small instrumental ensemble. Neither were the instruments all particularly close to those Purcell and his contemporaries knew, nor were they always used as would have been expected at the time.

Nobody claimed any sort of historical authenticity for Sunday's performance, and of course authenticity is an entirely separate issue from musical quality. Still, I found it incongruous to hear the song "Strike the viol"—a generous addition to the pieces listed in the program—performed with neither the viola da gamba nor the lute mentioned in the song's text (by Nahum Tate). We did see, and occasionally hear, a large lute or theorbo in several numbers on the first half, played sensitively by William Carter. But in "Strike the viol" and indeed the entire second half he took up the Baroque guitar, and in most pieces the basso continuo accompaniment also included cello. Neither instrument, ubiquitous in today's Baroque bands, is likely to have been much heard in seventeenth-century England.

In Purcell's day the cello was a recent invention, still largely confined to Italy, where it was used more

as a solo than a continuo instrument. Joseph Crouch took the trouble to play it more or less in a way that is documented in some historical sources: standing while resting the instrument on a piano bench. This was unobjectionable, espeically in view of his sensitive playing, even if still clearly that of a cellist rather than a subtler viola da gambist. Less welcome, to these ears, was the now-fashionable inclusion of a guitar in many numbers. That instrument—whose Baroque versions were quite different from those familiar today—was certainly used by Purcell's contemporaries, but probably more often for solo pieces and to accompany quiet chamber music than to constitute a sort of rhythm section in bands like this one.

I was glad that the “double bass” listed in the program, played by Peter McCarthy, turned out in fact to be a six-string violone playing at concert pitch (not an octave lower, like the modern double bass). But too often Bicket had it played pizzicato—plucked rather than bowed—while the cello was played normally. A similar combination of half-bowed, half-plucked bass lines was sometimes adopted by twentieth-century orchestral conductors, who perhaps thought it would convey the impression of a lute or of a harpsichord joining the orchestra. Such an effect hardly seems necessary when those instruments are actually present onstage.

The two trumpets heard in several numbers raise further issues. Mark Bennett was an able soloist in the opening work, an early Sonata in Six Parts by the Austrian composer Heinrich Biber. Biber would publish far more imaginative pieces a few years later in his 1676 *Sonatae*, likewise for trumpets and strings. Bennett's instrument was the type of pseudo-Baroque trumpet heard regularly today. Like the real Baroque instrument, it lacks valves, but it is equipped with so-called vent holes that apparently make it easier to play for musicians accustomed to modern trumpets.

This is another sensitive issue; nobody likes to be told that their voice or instrument is not what it is claimed to be. To be fair, the expression “Baroque trumpet” appeared nowhere in the program, but from a distance the instrument certainly looks like the magnificent Nuremberg trumpets from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that can be seen in museum collections in New York, Vermillion, and elsewhere (but not, alas, in Boston). The usual rejoinder is that the small compromises made here or there, with respect to copying a historical original instrument, serve only to make it easier to perform creatively. But at what point does convenience for the musician get in the way of rediscovering some musical effect that could be produced only through a closer approximation of something original?

My impression here, as in other performances using modernized instruments, is that the latter encourage performers to smoothe out the edges, making the playing more facile but less interesting. The rather pedestrian Biber piece made a brilliant effect, thanks to its opulent scoring, but the most engaging playing in it was in a solo for (surprisingly) the second violinist Walter Reiter.

Purcell provided more interesting music for the trumpet, particularly in a “symphony” or instrumental interlude from Act 5 of *King Arthur*. Here Bennett was joined by violinist Truscott and oboist Katharina Spreckelsen. But I was not convinced that the players, scattered across the Jordan Hall stage, were always aware of the full expansiveness of Purcell's long-spanning melodic lines. Nor did they coordinate with sufficient elasticity what should have been the supple interlocking fioratura of the three parts in this unusually scored Italianate movement.

Here at least Bicket was content to observe what was probably Purcell's intended instrumentation. All too often, however, clever but unnecessary manipulations of the scoring, especially in the vocal numbers, distracted from the singing and from Purcell's music. The result was frequently in effect an arrangement of what Purcell wrote, sometimes with fussy changes of instrument every few seconds.

Purcell’s music is full of subtly asymmetrical phrases and expressive little harmonic twists and turns, and these might have received more of the attention that was instead devoted to improving his instrumentation.

This re-instrumentation or orchestration particularly affected the instruments of the basso continuo: those playing the bass line (cello, bassoon, violone) together with those adding improvised chords (guitar, lute, keyboards). It was diverting to see Bicket shifting from harpsichord to organ between verses of one or two songs, and the changes could always be related to something in the words. But, given Purcell's inventive music, the compulsive variation in sound is as unnecessary and anachronistic as the silly stage business that directors too often impose on singers in present-day performances of Baroque opera. Both practices attract attention to the director and away from the music.

The nadir of this approach came with the addition of a tambourine (played by trumpeter Bennett) to several dance movements that had no need for the distracting jingle. In the “Dance for the Followers of Night” from *The Fairy Queen,* the tambourine helped prevent anyone from hearing the beautiful but quirky double canon (a sort of round) that Purcell incorporated into this piece. Such music does not need artificially imposed color of this sort.

The rescoring of Baroque classics was common in the early twentieth century, when composers and conductors like Respighi and Stokowski became interested in popularizing early music. It went out of fashion during the 1960s, but it has come back as performers have realized that the austerity seemingly dictated by some historical sources is not necessarily the only way to perform this music. Adding oboes to Purcell's string orchestra in *King Arthur*, as Bicket did, is perfectly effective, and may well even be historically authentic. The oboe was another recent invention in 1691, but one that had probably already been brought to London from Paris, and for good reason. One might have considered adding oboes in Muffat's Passacaglia as well. But having the harpsichord drop in and out of the song “If music be the food of love” was merely obtrusive and made it even harder to hear the singing.

Perhaps, however, some of this clever re-instrumentation was necessary. For Scholl's singing, although often beautiful, failed by itself to project all the variety of expression in Purcell's songs. When Dryden's poem in “Music for a while” mentions the mythological fury Alecto, it was the continuo instruments, not Scholl, who hardened the music into something representative of the snakes that “drop from her head.” Nor did I hear a single trill or other ornament in the singing—a serious omission, when trills and other “graces,” as Purcell called them, are an essential expressive element in this music. It was as if a pianist were to play Chopin without using the damper pedal. When Scholl repeated “Music for a while” as an encore piece, I did not detect one departure from the way it had been first performed—which for a Baroque singer, like a jazz musician today, shows at the very least a failure of the imagination if not of nerve.

None of this is to deny that Sunday's concert included some excellent playing and singing. Scholl reached some lovely high notes in the long air “O Solitude,” even if I am not sure that he, any more than the players in the “symphony,” quite succeeded in projecting the extraordinary character of Purcell's sometimes soaring, sometimes plunging melodic line. The song “An Evening Hymn” was very well suited to his voice and general approach, and the famous “Dido's Lament” (from the opera *Dido and Aeneas*) was sustained remarkably well, given the very slow tempo at which it was taken—even if it was over-conducted. But this was not the only number in which Bicket might have played the harpsichord more demonstratively, rather than waving his arms ostenatiously while seated at the instrument. To be sure, his predecessor Pinnock was one of those who helped make this an accepted practice for star harpsichordist-directors.

All in all, then, this was a perfectly acceptable replaying of quite a lot of familiar music, together with one welcome if disappointing “new” piece by Biber. The Celebrity Series and BEMF deserve thanks for providing a program booklet that included thorough notes by Richard E. Rodda, although the account of *Dido and Aeneas* as a work of 1689 needs to be revised in the light of recent scholarship. It might have been helpful, too, to have pointed out how many of the selections, besides Dido's Lament, were variations on simple harmonic schemes or “grounds” (a favorite device of Purcell's): not only the three instrumental chaconnes or passacaglias but also the songs “O Solitude” and “Music for a while,” plus substantial portions of the Biber work.

Bach cantata performances at Emmanuel Church, Boston (Jan. 19, 2011)

Boston's Emmanuel Episcopal Church on Newbury Street became famous among music lovers during the 1970s for the performances of Bach cantatas led by the late Craig Smith during its Sunday services. The tradition continues under Ryan Turner, Smith's successor as church Music Director and Artistic Director of Emmanuel Music, the church's resident ensemble (for a schedule of cantata performances, see http://www.emmanuelmusic.org/calendar_tickets/10-11season/caltix10-11_cantatas.htm).

In today's early-music world, liturgical reconstructions—concerts and CDs that replicate historical services, such as the coronation of a Venetian doge—have become common. But what takes place at Emmanuel Church is the real thing: a church service that incorporates the text and music of a work by Bach originally composed for just such a purpose. Emmanuel's present-day Episcopal service is remote in many ways from the orthodox Lutheran liturgies of early eighteenth-century Weimar and Leipzig in Germany. Bach's pastors would not have attempted to make non-Christians welcome in their congregations, and a visitor to Leipzig could hardly even have found a place to sit in a church where pews were family possessions (and in which genders were segregated). Yet on two recent visits the rector, the Rev. Pamela L. Werntz, went out of her way to make visitors comfortable, on days whose liturgical subject (baptism) might especially have divided those who are and are not church members.

I mention this because no one seeking good performances of sacred works such as these should be deterred by the need to attend the service as well. One could try to time one's arrival to coincide with the moment when the instrumentalists file into the church to join the chorus in the cantata, after the sermon and communion. But to do so would mean missing not only some other very fine service music, but also parts of the service itself that might prove interesting, thought-provoking, or inspirational, even to the non-religious. On the first day I attended, Dr. Werntz's sermon touched on early church history, textual criticism, and Jewish theology, among other things. The following week I learned about the archeology of the Jordan River basin and the possibility of interpreting Jesus's traditional designation as “Lamb of God” from outside the tradition of “patriarchal retributionary justice.”

Bach's sacred music cantatas were, course, written to promulgate religious lessons specific to the days for which they were written. Cantata 155 was composed for the Second Sunday after Epiphany in 1716, when that day fell on January 19. We don't know exactly when Bach wrote Cantata 9, but it was intended for the Sixth Sunday after Trinity, perhaps July 20, 1732. The days on which I heard these two works, January 9 and 16, 2011, were actually the First and Second Sundays after Epiphany, respectively. But no matter; the texts of both cantatas bear some relation to the days on which they were performed, and these were not, after all, liturgical reconstructions but actual liturgies. (Bach, too, occasionally reassigned works from one day of the church year to another.)

I did not attend many of the services with Bach cantatas that Craig Smith directed. Therefore I am not prepared to comment on how the present performances compared with those of the past. Ryan Turner

directed the music on January 9. Principal Guest Conductor John Harbison, who served as Acting Director of Emmanuel Music until Turner's installation last fall, led the ensemble on January 16. Harbison, of course, is also a composer whose symphonies are being heard at Symphony this year.

Although some may think of “Bach cantatas” as a homogeneous repertory, the roughly two hundred surviving works are of varying length, style, form, and perhaps quality. Cantata 155 is a relatively early work (the numbers are non-chronological), composed for the chapel of the dukes of Weimar on a text by the court poet Salomo Franck. It comprises two recitative-aria pairs and a concluding chorale or hymn setting. Cantata 9 is a so-called chorale cantata, adding to the structure of Cantata 155 a large opening choral movement at the beginning and a third recitative just before the final chorale. The poet, like the date, of Cantata 9 is unknown. But it is clearly a much later work, written for the city churches of Leipzig, where Bach served from 1723 to his death in 1750. Despite these differences, it has become clear in recent decades that both works were intended for performance by an ensemble that probably included just four male singers, who participated in both solo and “choral” movements. They were accompanied by an orchestra of probably four violinists and a single player on each of the remaining parts, including one or two woodwind soloists. Emmanuel Music uses a mixed chorus of about sixteen and an orchestra of about a dozen for these works, that is, a few more string players than Bach did, all playing “modern” instruments.

So how do they sound? Many of the musicians are well known to concert goers from their frequent appearances with other Boston-area ensembles. The vocal soloists performed with flawless taste and, for the most part, exceptional precision. The choir, although having little to do in Cantata 155, achieved the same high standard in the opening chorus of Cantata 9. The orchestral playing on the whole was similarly clean and tasteful, and I particularly appreciated the solid foundation laid by cellist Michael Curry, who as part of the continuo group was unfailingly sensitive to soloists and chorus alike.

Yet the overall effect of both performances was, for this listener, rather neutral. Craig Smith drew attention to Franck's “eccentric and colorful” text for Cantata 155, in a note that was unsigned, and unfortunately truncated, in the service booklet but is intact online (at http://www.emmanuelmusic.org/notes_translations/notes_cantata/n_bwv155.htm#pab1_7). Nevertheless, the “moving and highly dramatic arioso”—Smith's apt description of the opening movement—seemed colorless, despite the conscientious work of soprano Susan Consoli. And she seemed a bit rushed by the quick tempo taken in the difficult second aria. There, too, the strings sounded excessively polite in their performance of the so-called “dotted” rhythms that Bach uses to paint the image of a soul “thrown” into the arms of its savior. The first “aria”—actually a duet—was similarly bland, despite the elegant singing of alto Deborah Rentz-Moore and tenor Zachary Wilder. Neither made much of the expressive dissonances that Bach repeatedly places on the accented verbs of Franck's text, “you must *believe*, you must *hope*.” Here, also, I must differ with some against-the-beat slurring by the solo bassoonist, Thomas Stephenson, that to these ears introduced a small element of flippancy to an otherwise cleanly articulated solo line.

Cantata 9 was composed up to a decade later than most of Bach's chorale cantatas; indeed, it was one of the last dozen or so of his surviving sacred works (others are either lost or were based on earlier compositions). In the chorale cantatas, the entire text is built around the various stanzas of a single Lutheran hymn or chorale. In addition to ending with a simple setting of a chorale melody, as do most of Bach's church cantatas, each chorale cantata also opens with a long and more elaborate setting of the same melody. Bach's congregations knew these chorales by heart—words as well as tunes. Thus they could readily appreciate how the traditional poetry and music were incorporated into a new composition that amplifies and interprets the original. Not so today, even in as musical a congregation

as Emmanuel's.

I assume it is for this reason that Harbison prefaced the cantata proper by inviting the congregation to stand and sing the last stanza of the chorale—that is, the last movement of the cantata, accompanied by choir and orchestra. Congregational participation in this sense was hardly sanctioned either by Bach's score or by liturgical tradition in Bach's Leipzig. But in principle it makes sense, though I'm not sure how effective it was in practice. Perhaps a word of explanation would have helped some listeners understand the reason for it.

The performance itself had many of the same strengths as the previous week's. The choir was delightful in the opening movement, although it was hard to make out the inner parts clearly, perhaps because of the church's acoustic. The woodwind solos in this movement and in the penultimate duet were performed very cleanly by flutist Vanessa Holroyd and oboist Peggy Pearson. Yet their "modern" approach to articulation tended to even out the many small irregularities in Bach's variegated instrumental lines. Soprano Roberta Anderson and alto Pamela Dellal sang the duet very finely. But I can't share Harbison's enthusiasm for this movement, which I find an almost workaday setting of a doctrinaire text ("Only faith can justify").

Harbison, in his notes, describes the work's three recitatives as "Preacher's" recitations, and indeed Bach assigns all three, unusually, to the same bass voice, typically the voice of authority in his cantatas. Bass David Kravitz sang them with the commanding tone that they require, but unfortunately the intonation became somewhat indefinite at a few crucial moments. I was also disappointed by the tenor aria, which Harbison took at an almost jig-like clip, despite the involuted melodic lines and complex harmony. The words of the aria are certainly dramatic, but I wonder whether the references to sinking down and falling over a precipice represent "contorted and crazed" despair, as opposed to a quieter or more reflective variety of dejection. Tenor Charles Blandy seemed to have a hard time negotiating some passages. And I didn't think that Heather Braun's violin playing, accurate though it was, sounded quite like the "avenging, distended tarentella" that Harbison described in his notes. He sees the aria as reflecting Luther himself, "despairingly disturbed" by his understanding of divine justice. Perhaps this vision might be more effectively realized in a less "modern," more "baroque" performance, one taking a more rhetorical approach to details such as Bach's careful articulation of the string parts (which, again, I found homogenized in this performance).

Cantata 9 was sung in English, using Harbison's own musically sensitive translation. I was unable to attend a post-service "talk-back" in which Harbison promised to discuss the text and translation. Thus I cannot say whether anyone else was prepared to quibble with the small licenses taken with the original German—particularly in the tenor aria, whose poem was made more vivid by turning "sunk" to "drowning," and "precipice" to "hell-pit." Still, I don't think anyone could reasonably object to using so fine a translation in performance. More problematically, the words were not always sufficiently distinct for the choice of language to make much audible difference—at least toward the back of the church, where I was seated on this occasion. Of course, a foreign-language text could have an alienating effect that one might want to avoid especially in a church performance. Reflecting that, Stravinsky sanctioned translations into the local language for many of his vocal compositions, excepting *Oedipus Rex* (just performed at Symphony), where he actually intended the distancing effect that the Latin translation creates.

It is fitting to add a word about the other music heard in these services. The January 16 service opened with the first movement of Bach's G-minor sonata for unaccompanied violin, played by Boston University student Sarah Atwood. This was an exceptionally well-controlled performance, very

precisely realizing Bach's carefully notated rhythms. Yet for that reason it lacked the improvisatory fire that this sort of music was perhaps meant to convey. By coincidence, on the way home after the service I happened to hear another violinist performing the same piece in the Park Street subway station, considerably more slowly. Both, perhaps, were aiming at the sort of solemn, reverential tone that might make this difficult piece seem appropriate for church.

Yet that is the opposite of the fervor expressed in the Baroque organ preludes that more often introduce services today. To be sure, most such pieces were probably composed for recitals, not services, as was the jig-like C-major fugue by Buxtehude that ended the January 16 service. This was played with lively and sure fingers (no feet in this one) by organist Tim Steele. He was substituting that day for Nancy Granert, whom, however, I heard the previous week in a very clear performance of Buxtehude's fantasia on the chorale melody “Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern.” The organ, incidentally, was hardly designed for such seventeenth-century music, but both players came up with crisp registrations that were more than adequate.

Within the service itself, Cantata 155 was preceded by the four-part motet “Tribus miraculis” by the late-sixteenth-century Italian composer Luca Marenzio. This was an interesting selection by a composer better known for his vivid madrigals. It is not a particularly striking work, but as in the cantata the performance might have gone a little further toward fulfilling the work's expressive potential; I found the quiet final Alleluia unnecessarily understated. A week later Harbison conducted the five-part motet “O Herr Jesu Christe” by the German composer Johann Herrmann Schein. Although published in 1623, it imitates the popular style of Marenzio's five-part Italian madrigals (as Schein in effect admitted). Harbison's brief program note noted the “volleying between the two sopranos”—quick exchanges of “o, o” and “ach, ach” that were sung with great delicacy and lightness. I wonder, though, whether this “hocketing,” as he also called it, was not meant to evoke the longing which similar writing expresses in Marenzio's madrigals.

It is remarkable that these performances should take place regularly and should be, on the whole, so well prepared. The care in their realization extends to online publication of the texts and commentaries, for which the directors and others who contribute to them are owed many thanks. This is music presented not only for its own sake but for what it might mean or accomplish at some higher level. Anyone who cares about music in Boston ought at least occasionally to attend and support these services, and perhaps not only for the music.

“Enigmatic Legacy: Music of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach,” (Dec. 9, 2010)

[My first contribution to the *Intelligencer* was this feature on the 300th birthday of the oldest Bach son.]

As the year 2010 draws toward a close, lovers of keyboard music will remember the bicentenaries observed during the year for Chopin and Schumann, while looking forward to that of Liszt in 2011 and perhaps recalling Mendelssohn's in 2009. But before the present year ends, we shall also have passed the three-hundredth birthday of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, born Nov. 22, 1710.

The oldest son of the great Johann Sebastian Bach, Friedemann, as I shall him, was regarded by many during his lifetime and afterwards as the most brilliant of his father's sons—of whom no fewer than five became professional musicians, four of them composers. Today Carl Philipp Emanuel, born four years later in 1714, is perhaps the best known and the most frequently performed. But Johann Christian, the youngest of all (born 1735), has always been a close rival, thanks to his influence on the young Mozart.

Friedemann has never been so well known or appreciated. All four composer sons lived during what we consider the transition between the Baroque and Classical periods in music. All were also professional keyboard players, composing sonatas, concertos, and other solo music for their own instruments, as well as chamber music, orchestral works, and vocal music, even operas in the case of Johann Christian. The two older sons, Friedemann and Emanuel, are often viewed as representatives of a so-called *empfindsamer* style. The German term refers to a hyper-expressive, proto-Romantic manner that combines highly rhetorical, rhythmically complex melody with chromatic harmony reminiscent of Sebastian's. Christian's music, on the other hand, is closer to the Classical style of Mozart, although his earliest works are remarkably close to Emanuel's. Johann Christoph Friedrich, born in 1732, composed in styles resembling those of both Emanuel and Christian.

Friedemann, not surprisingly, is closest to Sebastian, above all in his adherence to the latter's contrapuntal conception of music. Only Friedemann wrote a significant number of musically engaging fugues, for instrumental and vocal ensembles as well as for keyboard instruments. And although all four sons were keyboard virtuosos, Friedemann seems to have been the most prodigious performer and the only one noted for his organ playing.

Yet barely a hundred works survive by Friedemann, many of them still unpublished. Emanuel, Friedrich, and Christian all had successful careers, enjoying prestigious court appointments and seeing their music disseminated widely in both print and manuscript copies. Friedemann never rose above the level of a church organist, ending his career unemployed and supposedly a drunk. To help make ends meet, he supposedly sold off the manuscripts of his father's music that he had inherited, occasionally falsifying their attributions. It was for this reason, incidentally, that Sebastian's organ arrangement of a Vivaldi concerto was long assigned to Friedemann.

The truth of the more scurrilous allegations is uncertain. But the unflattering anecdotes that circulated after Friedemann's death do seem to have reflected a difficult personality that alienated potential patrons. Moreover, in an age when composers were adopting increasingly simple and popular styles, Friedemann insisted on writing music that is challenging for both player and listener. His younger brothers were more willing to compromise. Emanuel, in particular, would learn (as did Haydn and Mozart) to write music that is relatively simple and popular in style while remaining expressive, even dramatic. Emanuel would go to Berlin as keyboard player to King Frederick “the Great” of Prussia by

1741. Friedemann would come to the Prussian capital only in 1774, after Emanuel had left for Hamburg. Despite receiving a favorable reception from the king's sister, Friedemann blew his chances for her support by intriguing to have her make him her *Capellmeister* or music director, a position that was held securely by Johann Philipp Kirnberger (a pupil of Sebastian).

Friedemann's career had started out promisingly. He was born in Weimar, seat of a small duchy that would become famous in the nineteenth century as the home of Goethe, Schiller, and Liszt. But it was already a significant musical center when Sebastian was hired there as court organist in 1708. Before his tenth birthday, Friedemann received from his father the famous Little Keyboard Book now in the Yale University library. The manuscript contains not only Sebastian's inventions and other pieces but (probably) Friedemann's first ventures in composition. The family by then had moved to Cöthen, and in 1723 they moved again to Leipzig. There Friedemann attended university before gaining his first professional position in 1733, as organist at the Church of St. Sophia in Dresden.

Capital of Saxony, Dresden was also the musical capital of northern Germany, and Friedemann, like his father, doubtless had hopes of gaining a position in its court orchestra or chapel. He must have played in numerous private concerts as a keyboard virtuoso; not a single organ work can be certainly traced to this period, yet we know of several brilliant keyboard sonatas as well as at least two concertos for keyboard and strings. He also wrote symphonies and instrumental chamber music. Some passages in these works are uncompromisingly contrapuntal, echoing the *Art of Fugue* which Sebastian was writing at this very time. Yet the concertos are surprisingly theatrical, giving the soloist opportunities for display (such as hand-crossing) that we associate more with Domenico Scarlatti than with members of the Bach family. These works also contain echoes of Italian operas like Johann Adolph Hasse's *Cleofide*, premiered at Dresden in 1731 in a performance that Friedemann is thought to have heard.

Yet Friedemann publishing nothing until 1745, when a single keyboard sonata came out, optimistically titled the first in a series of six such works. By then, however, Emanuel had issued a dozen such pieces, the first six dedicated to his new employer, the king of Prussia. Friedemann probably already understood that his path upward in Dresden would be blocked, for a year later he moved to Halle, a university town in Prussian territory. There he would serve as organist until 1764, composing and performing vocal as well as instrumental works. His vocal music, most of it still unpublished, resembles his father's in many respects. Even a large serenata in honor of the king's birthday in 1758, one of the few secular works, is close in form to Sebastian's church cantatas. Yet the arias draw on the Dresden operatic style, even incorporating cadenzas. The choruses comprise strict fugal passages alongside stunning melismas and arpeggios that may involve all four singers simultaneously. (These choruses, like most of Sebastian's, were composed for four male singers, not a mixed choir in the modern sense.)

Why Friedemann quit his Halle job in 1764, and what he did for the next ten years, are uncertain. The German scholar Peter Wollny, whose work on Friedemann has greatly enhanced our understanding of the man and the music, suggests that he toured as a virtuoso, traveling perhaps as far as Vienna and the Baltics, even to Russia. If so, he would have been performing his own music for small private gatherings, hoping to pick up commissions and well-off students, much as Beethoven would do a few decades later. Occasionally, too, he would have been joined by small string ensembles in performances of his concertos. But the difficult writing for the strings in these works would have frustrated the mixed amateur and professional players who would have participated in such events—all sight-reading from Friedemann's laboriously hand-written parts. Although we know of two fantasias for which a Baltic nobleman paid a very high price, such successes may have come only rarely.

When, in 1774, Friedemann moved to Berlin, he gave two organ recitals that were favorably reported in the local papers. What he played is unknown, but it might have consisted largely of improvisations. Those who knew him later reported that he disliked writing things down, and the small number of solo keyboard pieces that survive may have been intended less for himself than for pupils and for admirers seeking souvenirs of his playing. None of these works are for organ with pedals; rather, we have eight witty fugues that he presented to Princess Anna Amalie, as well as about ten sonatas, as many fantasias, and a dozen extraordinary polonaises—pieces very different from but as distinctive as the polonaises that Chopin would compose in the next century.

Surprisingly, a 1941 film gives a reasonably accurate impression of what Friedemann's concerts may have been like from. The plot of *Friedemann Bach*, based on a fanciful nineteenth-century novel, is entirely fictional. But in one scene, downloadable from YouTube, the composer plays for an aristocratic gathering. Here the soundtrack incorporates fragments from three of Friedemann's actual fantasias, which in turn consist of fragments from his sonatas and other pieces. Hence the composer's improvisations may actually have been in part medleys drawn from his existing compositions. Amazingly, the harpsichord seen in the film seems to be an actual instrument by Michael Mietke still preserved at Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin, although what one hears on the soundtrack is a jangly early twentieth-century instrument.

When I perform my own recitals of Friedemann's music, I am always asked two things: Was he really a drunk, and who was the better composer, he or Emanuel. I don't know the answer to the first question, and I don't think the second can have a simple answer. Friedemann is a more rigorous composer than his younger brother, maintaining three- or four-part imitative counterpoint and intensively developing a few memorable motives throughout many compositions. Emanuel's textures are lighter and his decorative approach to composition, which I've called “composition as variation,” can be more facile. Many of Emanuel's simpler pieces are frankly trivial, something that cannot be said of anything by Friedemann, who never wrote pedagogic pieces, strophic songs, and the like.

Yet at his best, I think that Emanuel is more imaginative and more capable of moving the listener. Despite the fame of his improvisations, Friedemann's fantasias are less rhetorical and less original in their form and expressive trajectory than Emanuel's. Whereas Emanuel in his old age was rethinking the very idea of the keyboard sonata and rondo, Friedemann by that point seems to have been merely recycling and revising earlier works.

Nevertheless, Friedemann is capable of amazing, almost Beethovenian strokes in works like his F-major keyboard concerto (as yet unrecorded and unpublished in a modern edition). Even more extraordinary is a keyboard concerto in G minor, which only recently has been assigned unequivocally to him and which is almost completely unknown. Here again one hears pre-echoes of Beethoven, particularly in its alternatingly meditative and rhetorical slow movement. I haven't yet mentioned Friedemann's famous flute duets, probably completed in his Berlin years. These surpass anything else written for the instrument in the eighteenth century in their florid melodic writing and the density of their two-part counterpoint, not to mention their technical challenges.

Friedemann himself will remain an enigma. Thanks to the loss of essential documents, we will never know much about him or his motivations. Even his personal appearance before his last years is mysterious. A widely reproduced portrait showing a lively figure of forty or so actually depicts his pupil Johann Christian Bach of Halle (not to be confused with his brother of the same name). The only reliable images are two drawings by a P. Guelle about whom little is known.

Yet Friedemann's music, such of it as we have, is invaluable. If his adherence to his father's tradition may have limited his creativity to some degree, it is also a continuing reason for interest in his music, which contains a fascinating and always original combination of stylistic elements belonging to both his father's generation and his own. More important, however, is Friedemann's uncompromising commitment to writing music that is at once rigorous and free, enlivened by wit as well as passion, challenging to both listener and performer and never satisfied with being merely pleasing.