

Review: 'Pocket-sized' Baroque fills ASO concert at Canfield Casino

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Juilliard student composers and soloists shared the program with masters of Baroque-era music Thursday in Albany Symphony Orchestra's concert at Canfield Casino. All went well despite the disparities of a few centuries.

ASO's December performance in Saratoga's historic Casino is always a highlight of the holiday season, with tree lights sparkling against the snow in the surrounding Congress Park.

Music director David Alan Miller's cleverly designed program found all the instrumentation required for the various works with just 20 musicians — 15 strings, two oboes, bassoon and harpsichord. Considering the lack of a major soloist and the usual trio of Saratoga performances being cut to just two this season, it can be assumed the ASO tightened its belt this year.

Miller asked a couple of Juilliard's composition teachers to select student composers for ASO commissions, challenging them to study Baroque-era music and to write "pocket concertos" — works of just eight to 12 minutes in length — in a manner that the Baroque masters might have produced had they been alive today. The student composers themselves were to choose the concerto instrument and the student soloist.

Juilliard students come in a variety of ages and levels of academic accomplishment, and it appears none of these composers were green undergrads, but highly accomplished and recognized pros, completing graduate degrees or other programs.

Still, they were young and enthusiastic, and enormously talented.

First up was Michael Ippolito's "Vivaldi's Bicycle," Concerto for Cello and Baroque Orchestra, played exquisitely by cellist Dane Johansen, an Alaska native.

Ippolito said he tried to capture impressions of Vivaldi's music as "wild and irregular" by bringing his spinning lines and sense of drama into his music, and he was successful. The first movement even gave a sense of bumps in the road.

Johansen had ample assignment for displaying his musicality, particularly in a plaintive mini-cadenza in the second movement.

Maestro Miller had opened the concert with C.P.E. Bach's Sinfonia in B minor, and followed Ippolito's piece with Correlli's Concerto Grosso, Op. 6, No. 8 (Christmas Concerto), giving ample opportunity for the capacity audience to compare or contrast the musical experience.

The next student composition was Concertino for Clarinet and Orchestra by Gity Razaz, featuring Moran Katz, who made her clarinet bubble and pop through music Razaz had described as an abstract representation of the Baroque.

Razaz' piece and Katz' performance were audience pleasers.

Katz grew her clear tone beautifully in places, thickening the mix. Her style meshed perfectly with Razaz' sharp, angular writing in her third movement.

The third student composition was Evan Fein's "The Frustration of Gottfried Reiche," Concerto for Trumpet and Baroque Orchestra, with soloist Colin Sieg.

Fein told the audience the story he developed as a setting for his three-movement work was about a musician sidekick of the great J.S. Bach, a trumpeter, who became frustrated with the band accompanying his own talented solos.

The tongue-in-cheek work showed Fein's ability to mimic style, and lent space for Sieg to display a gorgeous tone, even and golden.

Unfortunately, Fein's compositional efforts to invoke humor seemed hackneyed and forced, and Sieg was somewhat erratic in technical passages — or had Fein written those bumbles into the part? Regardless, the piece was good-natured.

The orchestra closed the program with J.S. Bach's Suite No. 1 in C major, as if to say, "This is what Baroque was all about."

The overture to the suite was absolutely grand, and the ASO musicians paired and grouped and divided and regrouped and chased each other all over the music in the fun fugue.

The concert will be broadcast on WAMC Northeast Public Radio at 8 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 23, and on WMHT-FM at 6 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 17.

URL: <http://www.saratogian.com/articles/2009/12/18/entertainment/doc4b2bccbb614bd472277292.prt>