

December 6, 2010

Very Old Instruments Embraced by the Young

By JAMES R. OESTREICH

In my experience of concerts presented by the Juilliard School's historical performance department — admittedly limited, in only the program's second season — I have been more impressed with performances by students than with those by faculty members. Not incidentally, perhaps, those student performances were almost all overseen by the formidable American early-music specialist William Christie, who works mostly in France.

While in town to conduct Mozart's "Così Fan Tutte" at the Metropolitan Opera, Mr. Christie, along with members of his French ensemble, Les Arts Florissants, worked with the 24 students enrolled in the program, who form the main body of its orchestra, Juilliard415. And on Friday evening Mr. Christie led the orchestra, filled out with a few Juilliard students who usually play modern instruments, in a program of French Baroque music in the school's Peter Jay Sharp Theater.

Well, mostly led. For two chamber works he simply sat onstage and listened, beaming with contentment.

But he did conduct the entire first half, beginning with the overture to Lully's opera "Atys," an Arts Florissants specialty. The opening attack was tentative, as were a few entrances that followed here and in Marc-Antoine Charpentier's "Concert Pour Quatre Parties de Violes." And the ensemble was a bit sluggish and uneven in the Lully, as if the players were only belatedly remembering Mr. Christie's fondness for brisk tempos.

But all of this was ironed out in the works that followed, a suite by Georg Muffat and instrumental arrangements of French Christmas carols by Charpentier. And by the start of the second half, in the overture to Rameau's opera "Naïs," Mr. Christie had a tightly knit unit to work with.

So tightly knit, in fact, that in one of the smaller-scale works that followed, the Third Concert from Rameau's "Pièces de Clavecin en Concert," which began with two violins, viola da gamba, flute and two harpsichords, the whole band joined in the rollicking Tambourins that end the work, uncondacted yet uncannily at one. And that togetherness held through a suite from Rameau's opera "Les Paladins" and encores by Charpentier and Rameau.

There were also fine individual performances in the chamber works, by Beth Wenstrom and Liv Heym, violinists; Emi Ferguson, flutist; Priscilla Smith, oboist; Aya Hamada and Jeffrey Grossman, harpsichordists; and others. And Mr. Christie singled out a player after the “Paladins” music: Molly Norcross — one of those modern-instrument specialists, on French horn — who had wielded the treacherous valveless horn without apparent difficulty.

“I don’t mean to be patronizing,” Mr. Christie said, “but I’d like to ask the young lady how many weeks you’ve been studying the natural horn.”

“Two,” Ms. Norcross answered, to gasps from the audience.

And to think what period brass playing sounded like in New York a decade or two ago.

The Juilliard historical performance department’s next presentation is an evening of Baroque chamber music on Dec. 16 at Paul Hall, the Juilliard School, 60 Lincoln Center Plaza; (212) 769-7406, juilliard.edu.



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