



Sunday, June 17 - 24

Christopher Hyde at Maine Classical Beat wrote a positive review of Tuesday's concert that we thought you would want to see. We hope you enjoy reading it.

Bach Virtuosi Festival Cathedral Church of St. Luke June 19, 2018

by Christopher Hyde / Maine Classical Beat

Olivier Messiaen, whose “Quartet for the End of Time” will grace the Bowdoin International Music Festival next month, once proclaimed that the birds, whom he thought of as angels, were the consummate musicians of the world. He had not heard flautist Emi Ferguson imitate a Goldfinch in Vivaldi’s work of the same name, (Opus 10, No. 3 in D Major), and then go on to out-do the original.

Ferguson, who played Tuesday night at St. Luke’s Cathedral, is just one of the noted Bach specialists brought to Portland by Lewis Kaplan under the auspices of the Bach Virtuosi Festival, formerly known as the Portland Bach Festival, which burst upon the world in 2016.

This concert, the second of the series (June 17-24), was devoted to composers who influenced Bach, and others who were deeply influenced by him. (I use the word “deeply” because virtually every classical musician has been influenced by J.S. Bach in one way or another.

The program opened with a Trio Sonata (Opus 2, No. 5 in A Major), by Dietrich Buxtehude, whom Bach once walked 100 miles to hear, losing his job in the process. The Trio was as much fun as the Vivaldi, a sparkling delight which could have been written by the master himself in one of his lighter moods. It was rendered with perfect balance and delineation of parts by Ariadne Daskalakis, violin, Beiliang Zhu, cello and Arthur Haas, harpsichord.

Noted Maine pianist Henry Kramer made his debut at the festival by comparing and contrasting the Bach Prelude and Fugue in E-flat Minor (BWV 853), with one in B-flat Major (No. 21) by Dimitri Shostakovich, who wrote his own set of 24, in imitation of Bach’s “Well-Tempered Clavier.”

I thought that Kramer might have chosen two pair in the same key. Instead he contrasted one of Bach’s foremost exercises in long-limbed Baroque counterpoint, with the most virtuosic of the Shostakovich set. For those who love the Russian, it was a dead heat, with Kramer offering equally fine interpretations of each.

Festival founder Lewis Kaplan appeared in the “Tempo di ciaccone,” from Bela Bartok’s Sonata for Solo Violin, heavily influenced by Bach’s Chaconne from the Partita No. 2 in D Minor (BWV 1004), but much more somber. It is perhaps even

more difficult to play than its predecessor, and so densely constructed that it would take several hearings to appreciate fully. We don't have a Brahms or Busoni to make a valid piano transcription.

A "Meditation über den Bach Choral 'Vor Deinm Thron Trete ich hiermit,'" by contemporary Russian composer Sofia Gubaidulina (b. 1931), came as a complete revelation, vividly depicting the appearance of J.S. Bach before the Throne of God. Bach has the last word, as chords based on his name, played on the harpsichord, end the work. And what a work it is, emerging from a fog of mystery, with strange sounds from violins, cello, bass and harpsichord, to eventually coalesce into a variation on the chorale played (loudly) by the bass, in an amazing performance by Kurt Muroki, and eventually into the full chorale in all its sonority. A true masterpiece, and enthralling throughout.

The program concluded with the reappearance of Kramer, with Renee Jolles and Yibin Li. violin, Karina Schmitz, viola, and Paul Dwyer, cello, in the Schumann Piano Quintet in E-flat Major, Opus 44. The final fugue, revealing the composer's study of Bach, is, to me, the most interesting part of the quintet, like the similar effort by Schubert in the "Wanderer" Fantasy.

For a quintet that has not played before, the ensemble was exemplary, and better than that, exciting. Its last performance in Portland was pedestrian, leading one to wonder if a group of five musicians, rehearsing this work for the first time, might not do better than a string quartet, set in its ways, with an "outside" pianist. Just a thought, but what can easily become a piano concerto, showed an excellent balance of forces.

The next concert of the Festival will be on Thursday, June 21, an all-Bach program of vocal and instrumental music at Etz Chaim Synagogue.

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