

## Review: Brandenburg Concertos bring a smile

HARVEY STEIMAN  
SPECIAL TO THE ASPEN TIMES  
ASPEN, CO COLORADO,

The irrepressible Nicholas McGegan was on hand this week for a two-night swing through Bach's Brandenburg Concertos at the Aspen Music Festival that can only be described as buoyant. Whether standing before the ensembles or leading the harpsichord, he fused a personal amalgam of period performance practice and the modern instruments played by the festival's artist faculty (and a few students in the ensemble). The result had the musicians and the audience constantly smiling Tuesday and Wednesday at Harris Hall.

Baroque music with McGegan at the helm is almost like jazz. Rhythm is the foundation. It never flags, but it bobs and weaves. At turns sprightly or driving, it always has a spring in its step. There is always a sense of freshness, of discovery, even in these overly familiar concertos. There is so much bounce it's danceable. In fact, as McGegan conducts he moves like a dancer. Sometimes he drops his hands and simply sways with the beat.

In the way he talks to the audience between pieces, you can hear the enthusiasm for the music, for Bach, for the history, for the impact the pieces had on their time and on ours.

But most of all you can hear the pulse of life in the music. Every one of the six concertos got inspired performances, the musicians making more of the notes by acting as something more than a collection of soloists. That is not to say that there were not some fabulous solo turns along the way.

Concerto No. 2, played last on Wednesday's program, fielded a front line of Gil Shaham, an international star on violin; Nadine Asin, who plays flute with both the New York Philharmonic and Metropolitan Opera orchestras; Ariana Ghez, principal oboe of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and Kevin Cobb, a member of the American Brass Quintet, playing an elongated piccolo trumpet.

From the first measure, the rhythmic surge they created practically lifted the audience from their seats. The sound was phenomenal, especially Cobb's little trumpet, from which he coaxed deft gradations of sound and fashioned them into phrases full of personality. His legato was sweet, and the fast phrases nearly note-perfect, a feat rather like dancing across a tightrope. Ghez produced sinuous oboe music without losing the rhythmic drive, while Shaham and Asin added their distinct colors to the mix.

But what made the music so effective was how each of these soloists melted into Bach's texture so easily, only stepping forward when the music tossed them the top line to carry forward.

Another highlight was No. 4, which concluded the program on Tuesday, with Asin and Martha Aarons playing the parallel flute lines as if they were one instrument capable of harmonizing with itself. Adele Anthony was the violin soloist, weaving through the middle of Bach's counterpoint until she unleashed an explosive solo in the Presto finale.

John Zirbel played several impeccable horn solos in No. 1, which opened the proceedings, teaming with student Alexander Kienle for a joyfully raucous contrapuntal hunting-horn duet in the finale. David Halen's violin playing on No. 5 may have been a bit rich in texture for Baroque music, but the trio he played with Mark Sparks' flute and Kenneth Cooper's harpsichord in the slow movement was nothing short of exquisite. Cooper's cadenza in No. 5, one of the big solo turns in these concertos, was a thing of beauty until something went wrong on dense passages in the low register of the instrument. But he didn't miss a beat, and it all fell into place in the later movements.

Like that kludge in the cadenza, not everything was perfect. The first movement of No. 1 threatened to derail several times, as timing went out of sync and the horns muffed a few exposed notes, but it found its footing in the remaining four movements. And with that, the evenings were off and dancing.

In the end, this was memorable music-making for the sheer pleasure of it, both for the musicians and the audience. It communicated, it thrilled and it satisfied. I don't think I am the only one who came out of Harris Hall happier.

**Not to miss this weekend**

Don't miss *La Bohème*, the first offering from the Opera Theater Center, either in the Wheeler at 7 p.m. Saturday or in the free TV simulcast in Wagner Park. Word is the leads are both terrific. There's a final performance Monday, also at 7. Saturday evening at 8:30 p.m. provides one last chance to hear Gil Shaham and Adele Anthony, teaming with top faculty artists for Martinu and Beethoven sextets. The chamber music concert Saturday afternoon at 3 offers Villa-Lobos' exciting Choros No. 4 and an all-star cast in Mendelssohn's String Quintet.

---

<http://www.aspentimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090717/AE/907169973&parentprofile=search&template=printart>