

Philharmonia Baroque's vivid love note to Brahms

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If the prospect of the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra playing music of the late Romantic era seems anomalous, think again. The orchestra has made occasional forays into the 19th century over the years, but rarely with the verve and robustness on display during Sunday night's all-Brahms program in Berkeley's First Congregational Church.

Music director Nicholas McGegan prefaced the concert with a few words about the attempts at the historical accuracy on display - the use of instruments from the latter half of the 19th century, the seating plan (basses at the back) that Brahms would have recognized.

All very interesting, but the real test came in performance. And nothing affirmed the power of this approach like the splendid performance of the Serenade No. 1 in D that occupied the first half of the program.

Prompted by McGegan's remarks, a listener's attention was drawn first to the instrumental colors involved, particularly from the woodwinds. These were dark and smoky compared with their modern counterparts, and they gave the entire performance a rich and almost peaty quality.

That in turn changed, or at least deepened, the character of some of the individual movements. The light-footed first scherzo - which sounds in any case like the scherzo from Brahms' Second Piano Concerto as performed by Mendelssohnian sprites - took on an even more pronounced woodland cast. The slow movement summoned up a world of almost subterranean seductiveness.

McGegan furthered these impressions with a fiercely engaged performance. Avoiding the sleek, sometimes impersonal quality that can often seep into modern renditions, he embraced every opportunity to give the music a musky physicality - especially in the outer movements, whose rhythmic force was arresting.

The second half brought a more equivocal account of the Violin Concerto, with Viktoria Mullova as soloist. The orchestra continued in a similarly vigorous vein; oboist Marc Schachman shone in the plangent solo that dominates the slow movement.

But Mullova - who joined the orchestra three years ago for a revelatory account of the Beethoven Violin Concerto - never quite got into the spirit of the thing.

Her playing was precise but emotionally distant, unfolding with a sort of implacable geometry that seemed worlds away from the expressive urgency of Brahms' writing. Even in the gypsy strains of the finale, she seemed to be working very hard to be sure nothing got too messy.

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