

Philharmonia Baroque's lively Mozart pastiche

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic
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Mozart has been dead these 200 years and more, and yet there are still new works turning up on concert programs. For some very loose definition of "new," that is.

The Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra and its longtime principal hornist, R.J. Kelley, opened the season over the weekend with a horn concerto of sorts - actually a pastiche that Kelley assembled from various new and familiar Mozartean sources. And if the result wasn't enough to knock any of the canonical four concertos out of circulation, the novelty of the offering, combined with Kelley's distinguished performance, made for a lively concert in Berkeley's First Congregational Church on Sunday night conducted by Music Director Nicholas McGegan.

The new bits came in the outer movements - an incomplete sketch of an opening (K. 370b), reconstructed from various fragments by the Mozartean musicologist and pianist Robert Levin, together with the Rondo K. 371, which is also incomplete but closer to an intact state. In between these, Kelley inserted the slow movement from the Concerto No. 4, K. 495, as a sort of lubricant.

It's a tribute to Kelley, or Mozart, or both, that this Frankenstein patchwork emerged as a perfectly credible three-movement concerto. Kelley certainly gets credit for the performance, which was tuneful, lively and full of ingenious turns.

He flew through the challenging passagework of the final rondo with aplomb, and brought a dark, lustrously singing tone to the central slow movements. There were some technical infelicities in the first movement (Kelley's performance never quite let you forget how fiendishly difficult the valveless horn is to play at all), but there was plenty of dramatic fire as well. Kelley's cadenza in the finale - complete with some tricky multiphonics - was impressive in its own right.

The rest of the program found McGegan and the orchestra pitching vigorously into orchestral music from the period. The opening account of Mozart's "Prague" Symphony was a bit thunderous for this taste, substituting big instrumental presence for rhythmic clarity or precision of ensemble.

But the evening concluded with a splendid performance of Haydn's Symphony No. 98, graced by a fluent slow movement and a truly streamlined presto finale. In between came a marvelous novelty, the overture to "La mort d'Orphée" by Franz Ignaz Beck, an almost exact contemporary of Haydn's whose music - to judge by this one brief selection - is imaginative, fiery and full of Schubertian harmonic touches.

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