

Review: Philharmonia Baroque

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic

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Music has never been a universal language, but there was a time when it was even more fragmented than it is today. Nicholas McGegan and the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra drove the point home Sunday night in Berkeley's First Congregational Church, opening their season with a thin but entertaining program of dramatic music from the mid-18th century.

The program was devoted to pieces from England and France - first, Thomas Arne's "Comus," a lively stage work based on Milton, and then Jean-Philippe Rameau's dramatic ballet "Pygmalion." Only 10 years and the English Channel separate the two pieces, but they might as well have been worlds apart.

Arne's score is a lively, tuneful bagatelle, full of crisply balanced phrases and forthright rustic airs. Rameau's music, by contrast, is stately and ornate, dominated by languorous recitatives and elegant dance numbers.

Even the themes are antipodal: Arne's well-scrubbed creation is a celebration of chastity, Rameau's a celebration of love. Whether that difference says anything about the respective national characters is a question left to the reader to decide.

But even if the two works seemed to have little enough to say to one another, McGegan shaped both with persuasive fervor and the orchestra responded aptly to the fleet phrasing of one and the lush, mannered rhetoric of the other.

In its original form, "Comus" - a pastoral cautionary tale about a woman who nearly loses her virtue to the dastardly title figure - offered a mixture of spoken dialogue and musical interludes, so the musical numbers had less work to do in carrying the plot forward. McGegan joined in to read some of the dialogue.

That left Arne free to assemble everything from jolly, jig-like tunes (the opening "Now Phoebus sinketh in the west") to lingering ballads like "On every hill, in every grove." The chorus is on hand to provide convivial partying and to point the final moral, and of course no pastoral entertainment would be complete without an "echo" number, offered with alluring tact by flutist Stephen Schultz.



For Rameau, the plot - the old Ovidian story of a besotted sculptor that ultimately leads to "My Fair Lady" - is largely a pretext for the dance numbers. Aside from the title character's extravagant final aria, most of the musical interest lies in these brief episodes, which are alternately graceful and rhythmically ferocious.

The singing in both pieces was first-rate and alert to the respective stylistic demands of the two composers. Colin Ainsworth brought a bright, beautifully articulated tenor to the Arne, then darkened and deepened it as Pygmalion.

The female roles were sweetly and ripely sung by sopranos Sophie Daneman and Meredith Hall. The Philharmonia Chorale, led by Bruce Lamott, dispatched its assignments with alluring urgency.

Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra: The program repeats at 8 p.m. today at the Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church; at 8 p.m. Friday in the Herbst Theatre; and at 8 p.m. Saturday at the First United Methodist Church in Palo Alto. Tickets: \$30-\$75. Call (415) 392-4400 or go to www.philharmonia.org.

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