

Review: Philharmonia, Symphony Baroque works

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The masterpieces of past ages - the Baroque period, to take today's example - present a musico-ecological problem. They worked just fine in their original habitat, but they're poorly adapted to modern concert life, which is designed to showcase the bigger works of the 19th and 20th centuries.

There are two main ways of dealing with the problem, and this week a fluke of the calendar brought them into a head-to-head matchup. You can plunk the music of Handel and Purcell onto a regular orchestra program, as the San Francisco Symphony did Wednesday night. Alternatively, you can adjust the circumstances of the performance to the music, the strategy adopted Thursday by the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra.

This week at least, Plan B won in a walk.

No doubt it's shallow to regard these programs - both of which repeat through the weekend - as some kind of competitive Baroque-off. But how often do two leading musical institutions offer contrasting takes on the same repertoire? They even included one piece, Purcell's Chacony in G Minor, on both programs.

Not only that, but the concerts could hardly have been more distinct in their approach or tone.

Wednesday's Symphony concert in Davies Symphony Hall, led by guest conductor Harry Christophers, was a dull, ponderous affair, marked by sluggish tempos and lugubrious phrasing. A listener might have been forgiven for jumping to the conclusion that this was tiresome stuff - or at least that a modern orchestra would be well advised to leave it alone.

Thursday's concert in Herbst Theatre, led by the irrepressible Nicholas McGegan, offered a wholly different outlook. Playing on period instruments and with a mastery

of period style - but more important, performing with a much-needed sense of rhythmic vibrancy - the orchestra made this music leap to life.

McGegan has been working this kind of magic for several decades now, but the incisiveness and depth of his conducting seemed particularly welcome. There was strong solo singing from the guest artists, and the contributions of Bruce Lamott's excellent Philharmonic Chorale sounded especially vital and beautiful.

What made the comparative intimacy of this program so telling was that the program was concentrated primarily on big public statements. The evening began with the first of Handel's Coronation Anthems, "Zadok the Priest," and concluded after intermission with the "Dettingen Te Deum," a 45-minute musical celebration of King George II's military victory over the perfidious French.

In other words, this was full monarchist pomp, with trumpets and drums blazing away and choral texts whose obsequious subtexts can only raise a qualm in the heart of modern small-d democrats (or small-r republicans, for that matter). Yet McGegan spurred his forces to explosions of sound whose grandeur and brilliant colors trumped all other considerations.

The exquisite trumpet playing of principal Hannes Rux, abetted by Fred Holmgren and Kathryn James Adduci, and Todd Manley's crisp timpani strokes contributed to the evening's overall flair.

Purcell's music, including the two vocal works "My Beloved Spake" and "Rejoice in the Lord Always," proved as harmonically deft and texturally surprising as ever. The fine soloists were countertenor Kai Wessel, tenor Thomas Cooley and baritone Nathaniel Watson, with baritone Jeffrey Fields filling out the lineup in one selection.

The night before, Christophers, a well-respected and widely recorded Baroque specialist, made soggy work of similar material. In his hands, the Purcell Chacony lumbered gracelessly along, and two Handel offerings - the overture to "Ariodante" and the third "Water Music" Suite - sounded far too weighty, although flutist Linda Lukas made some elegant solo contributions to the latter work.

Her fellow flutists, Tim Day and Robin McKee, joined violinist Alexander Barantschik as soloists in a graceful but rhythmically lax account of Bach's Fourth "Brandenburg" Concerto. Christophers kept up thematic consistency with two of

Respighi's suites of "Ancient Airs and Dances," his orchestrations of various lute music from the 16th and 17th centuries. None of it sounded especially danceable.

San Francisco Symphony/Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra: The Symphony program repeats at 8 p.m. today in Davies Symphony Hall. Tickets: \$25-\$125. (415) 864-6000 , www.sfsymphony.org. The Philharmonia program repeats at 8 p.m. today and 7:30 p.m. Sunday in the First Congregational Church, Berkeley. Tickets: \$29-\$72. (415) 252-1288 , www.philharmonia.org.

Audio downloads of Philharmonia recordings are available at www.philharmonia.org.

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