

Solo Instruments, Countertenor Steal Show at Indian Hill Concert

By McLaren Harris

How does one describe the Orchestra of Indian Hill's festival of Baroque music presented **Sunday, January 24**, under conductor Bruce Hangen at the Performing Arts Center of Littleton (MA) High School? There was a pleasing variety of works by Bach, Rameau, Telemann, Vivaldi, Pachelbel and Gluck, but perhaps the array of soloists, especially countertenor Matthew Truss, really stole the show.

Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 might receive more frequent hearings if not for the difficulty in finding a player for the piccolo trumpet, the highest treble instrument among the four soloists. Breath support and embouchure requirements are severe in such high registers, but trumpeter Greg Whitaker came well prepared, as did all the solo players – Markus Placci, violin, Melissa Mielens, flute, Nancy Dimock, oboe – as they and the orchestra delivered the bright outer movements with energy and securely sustained lines in the Andante.

Next came five dances from Jean-Philippe Rameau's opera-ballet *Les Fêtes d'Hébé* (The Festivals of Hebe). It must be said that the music begs for the visual spectacle of dancing as intended, as except for the final Chaconne, it lacks a really distinguishing character, notwithstanding Rameau's liberal use of *agréments* (ornamentation) here and there. The orchestra, however, seemed not bothered and rendered it well.

Then came one of the evening's highlights: a secular cantata by Telemann with arias and recitatives under the rather hilarious title, "*Funeral Music for an Artful Canary*," a pet apparently dispatched by a hungry cat. The friend for whom this lament was composed came to the right man. Telemann's *Tafelmusik* shared a philosophy with the *Gebrauchsmusik* of Paul Hindemith in the 20th century – music for every occasion. Telemann's cantata well surpasses the frivolity of the subject as truly artful and representative of his period.

What made Telemann's cantata really remarkable was the singing of countertenor Matthew Truss, an extraordinary musician with a true treble voice – strong, focused and agile – and a dramatic flair. He delivered each section in full tone and spot-on intonation, with mock sorrow and outrage in sound and presence. The collaboration between Truss and the orchestra's strings and harpsichord continuo was excellent, with conductor Bruce Hangen reading each text in the darkened auditorium. The audience was at once amused and highly appreciative of Truss's prodigious talent.

After intermission, the winner of Indian Hill Music's annual concerto competition, 15-year-old Jinji Zhang of Boxboro, played two movements of Vivaldi's C major Concerto for Piccolo, RV443, with skill and confidence that belie his years. His tone never wavered in the Largo, and he ripped through the brilliant passages of the finale with almost joyful determination – a credit both to him and to the Indian Hill School.

Johann Pachelbel's Canon in D – what, again? Yes, and welcome, because it is a beautiful work and gave the audience an opportunity to follow each canonic variation through the string sections, while the cellos and harpsichord labored along with the *basso ostinato*. Turn off the *ennui* and enjoy! They did.

The concluding four pieces from Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* brought back Matthew Truss in an aria originally for high-voice *castrato*, preceded by the familiar Overture, Dance of the Blessed Spirits and Dance of the Furies. Melissa Mielens's superbly tender flute solo in the Dance of the Blessed Spirits must be noted; the orchestra is fortunate to have her (and oboist Nancy Dimock) as principals.

As for Truss, he nearly raised the roof with Orpheus's joyful aria, *Addio, miei sospiri*, amazing listeners with his power, two-octave-plus range and secure placement as he negotiated the roulades and coloratura passages with agility and force. His is an extraordinary talent that should always find an appreciative audience, as it did Sunday.

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