

Introduction to Classical Music, MUSI 101-DL2

March 19, 2013

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Concert Report II

On Sunday, March 17, 2013 at 4:00 pm I attended a concert of Baroque religious music at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Burke, Virginia. The program included two organ works by Johann Sebastian Bach and the Stabat Mater by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi. This report contains a summary of my impressions of the performance as well as some background information obtained from The ABC of Classical Music – The Great Composers and Their Greatest Works published by Naxos of America, The Enjoyment of Music textbook by Norton, the concert program and the St. Andrew's Church website.

The program began with Bach's organ works. Although I have always regarded Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) as a composer, during his lifetime he was known primarily as an organist. His religion was very important to him, so it seemed fitting that I was listening to two of his religious organ compositions being performed in a church setting.

The first piece performed was Bach's O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig (Oh Innocent Lamb of God), BWV 656. This is a chorale from a collection known as the "Leipzig Chorales." A chorale is a hymn that is part of the Lutheran church service. This particular chorale was created to be used on Good Friday. There are three verses in this composition. In the first verse the melody is in the top voice; in the second it is in the middle; and in the final verse it is played in the pedal. The meter is duple and I would describe the tempo throughout most of the piece as andante. About two-thirds of the way through, there is a passage that reminded me very much of Bach's familiar Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring, BWV 147. Then toward the end of this piece the sound becomes increasingly chromatic/dissonant sounding leading to a long chord at the end. For this piece, the organist utilized the services of a page-turner.

The second organ piece performed was Bach's über Sei gegrüßet, Jesu gütig, BWV 768. This is a partita, which is a set of variations. This type of work begins with a chorale and then is followed by a series of variations. This particular work has eleven variations. The variations contain changes in tempo, dynamics and mood. The focus of the melody changes among the different registers. Some variations are light and lyrical; others loud and powerful. One variation struck me as having an irregular meter and rhythm. This piece also becomes chromatic/dissonant sounding toward the end. At the last minute however there is resolution in the final chord. For this piece, no page-turner was used.

According to the St. Andrew's website, their organ is a 3-manual, 46-rank DiGennaro-Hart pipe organ that was completed in August 2011. It was custom-built for their needs. There are three keyboards. The pipes are divided and mounted along three different wall sections – the largest pipes are on the left; the middle pipes are on the right; and the smallest pipes are in the middle.

Following the two Bach organ pieces, Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's Stabat Mater was performed. Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710-1736) was an Italian composer. He is best known for his work in developing Italian comic opera. He divided his musical efforts between the theater and the church. Stabat Mater, "the Mother was standing," is a musical setting to a poem that focuses on the sorrow of Mary, the mother of Jesus, at his crucifixion. The text is in Latin. It was written for a Good Friday service and it became one of the most popular works of the 18th century.

This work was performed by two vocalists (soprano and mezzo-soprano) accompanied by instrumentalists using Baroque-era instruments: two violins (one of the violins was made in 1641!), viola, cello, violone (similar to a bass) and harpsichord. The harpsichordist also acted as conductor, using his head or his hand to mark time and direct the performers on when they should begin.

There are twelve stanzas in the Stabat Mater poem. Some stanzas were sung as duets by both vocalists; other stanzas were sung as solos by the individual singers. When the singers were singing together, sometimes it was in harmony, other times it was more of a "back-and-forth" conversational style. Because of the subject matter, the tone was generally sad or somber. However, some of the stanzas were lighter than others. The vocalists performed with much emotion and facial expressions that conveyed the meaning of the words. I felt that they were telling a story. The music was generally syllabic and occasionally neumatic. Some of the stanzas began with an instrumental introduction. Most of the stanzas are in duple meter, but at least one sounded like it was in triple meter. This piece was very much appreciated by the audience who showed their appreciation with a standing ovation when the performance ended.

I have always liked the sound of a harpsichord and I was excited to see and hear a harpsichord “live”. I was surprised by the size of the instrument. It was much narrower than I expected. At the same time it was much “deeper” than I expected, with very long strings extending back from the keyboard. In our studies this semester we have learned that the harpsichord was not capable of producing very loud sounds. This was evident during the performance as the vocalists and string section seemed to overpower the sound of the harpsichord. I would like to hear a harpsichord solo sometime, so that I can better appreciate the sound.

I very much enjoyed the performance of Baroque music. Although I have been listening to classical music on the radio and the internet, attending a live performance and being able to listen to and watch the performers really adds to my appreciation of the music. I hope to attend additional Baroque performances in the future.

References:

1. The ABC of Classical Music – The Great Composers and Their Greatest Works by Keith Anderson published by NAXOS of America

2. The Enjoyment of Music, Eleventh Shorter Edition by Kristine Forney and Joseph Machlis published by W. W. Norton & Company

Friends of Music and the Arts at St. Andrew's present:



Music of the Passion

*Giovanni Battista Pergolesi
Stabat Mater*

*Johann Sebastian Bach
O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig, BWV 656
Partita über Sei gegrüßet, Jesu gütig, BWV 768*

*Sunday, March 17, 2013, 4:00 p.m.
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
6509 Sydenstricker Road
Burke, Virginia 22015*

