



Baroque festival goes mostly Mozart

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Founding father James Mason resigned from the directorship of the Grand River Baroque Festival and was replaced by friend and colleague Kevin Mallon, who in turn brought along his Aradia Ensemble (Toronto) to do most of the work this year.

Another curve was to devote an entire concert to the music of Mozart -- not exactly your standard baroque composer. Mallon explained that his ensemble looked forward to Mozart whereas normal orchestras are looking backward -- an interesting concept indeed. Full houses both evenings showed that the festival is still very much in the public eye. Fine weather and the wonderful ambience of the country grounds of David and Millie Buehlow helped no end, of course, to continue the tradition of this unique festival.

The opening night (Friday) featured solid baroque fare in the form of Handel's Water Music and the Royal Fireworks Music. De rigueur baroque specialists, such as Mallon and his band, go for zippy tempi, strongly accented bowings and springy, lively rhythm -- and decidedly not for a lush, romantic string sound. Most of these two works respond admirably to this treatment, especially the unbelievable horn playing on valveless baroque horns, which were so stunning as to nearly to eclipse everything else. Laurels to Derek Conrod, Scott Wevers and Ron George for that.

Mind you, all of these musicians are, in short, classy -- there's never a worry about going wrong or going off, even at Mallon's tempi. The Royal Fireworks closed the day with, in addition to those wonderful horns and trumpets, of all things, a tambourine in the rhythm section. It worked, too, as did the nifty field drum. This is top-drawer baroque, and done up proudly by these players.

Saturday afternoon featured an unusual ensemble that calls itself Musica Franca, featuring the virtuoso bassoonist Nadina Jackson, with her husband Fraser Jackson playing the contrabassoon (and adding an interesting lecture about reed-making which captured the audience's interest); oboists James Mason and Kathy Halvorson, plus Paul Jenkins, harpsichord, in music by those famous (did you know?!) baroque guys, Fasch, Boismortier and Zelenka. No Bachs there, quite, but this was very listenable music and the performances



were stratospheric -- maybe the hit of the weekend in terms of absolute, ultimate successful marriage of music and musicians. Theon Gordon Greene, the acting dean of music at Wilfrid Laurier University, entertained the dinner audience with tales about changing performance practices over the years.

Saturday evening started with K. 131, a Divertimento by the 16-year-old Mozart, sporting lots of winds along with the strings. A bit baroque-ish in feel at first, it turned into pure early Mozart as it went along. Soprano Carla Huhtanen entered with a rather dutiful if accurate performance of Exultate, Jubilate, then an in-character rendition of Deh vieni, non tardar from The Marriage of Figaro.

Last came Mozart's Symphony (No. 40) in G minor, K. 550, one of the super-masterpieces of all time, utilizing modern winds and baroque/classical strings.

In this treatment, the superbly-played wind parts were really audible for a change, and here and there the early strings make interesting points. But for day-in-day-out listening, we suspect that most symphony-goers will prefer modern strings with their strength, lustre, and expressive power.



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