

W O R C E S T E R

TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

February 15, 2010

Column: MUSIC REVIEW

Concertos display stylish tour de force

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Section: ENTERTAINMENT & LIFESTYLE

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Dateline: WORCESTER

COLUMN: MUSIC REVIEW

WORCESTER - J.S. Bach wrote the six Brandenburg Concertos while he was in Kothen, employed as conductor of the chamber orchestra that Prince Leopold von Anhalt-Kothen kept at his court. The prince, an accomplished musician and a lover of music, often joined his orchestra in playing the many compositions Bach wrote for them.

The musicians at Kothen were excellent instrumentalists, and the concertos were written with their virtuosity in mind. The Worcester Chamber Music Society and five guest artists, all excellent musicians themselves, beautifully recreated four of the Brandenburg Concertos before a capacity audience Saturday evening in the Chapel of the Holy Spirit at Assumption College as part of the HumanArts program.

The six concertos in the set were written at different times and later meticulously copied by Bach, bound and sent as an offering to Margrave Christian Ludwig of Brandenburg, to whom they were dedicated.

The Margrave never responded to Bach, (who wanted a position at Brandenburg) - indeed he may never have even heard the concertos performed. Nevertheless the concertos retained his name and, fortuitously, the Margrave preserved the score, enabling future generations to enjoy these remarkable works.

It would be impossible to comment on the accomplishments of each of the members of the Chamber Music Society within this program, but several extraordinary efforts bear mentioning. The program opened with Concerto 6, which uses no woodwinds or violins, giving this concerto a dark quality. The second movement, a lyrical duet between two violas, was beautifully phrased and sensitively played by Peter Sulski and Mark Berger. In Concerto 4, two flutes substituted for the recorders scored by Bach, and were joined by violin and harpsichord.

The flutists, Tracy Kraus and guest Orlando Cela, gave this concerto a bright and lively

flavor; and the third movement, featuring the violinist Rohan Gregory and the two flutes, was an exciting virtuosic display.

In 1717 Bach purchased a new harpsichord for Prince Leopold's orchestra, so it is quite likely that the spectacular, extensive cadenza he wrote at the end of the 1st movement in Concerto 5 was written to showcase the new instrument.

Ian Watson, who superbly played the continuo part in all the concertos, provided a brilliant account of the cadenza.

In the second movement, flute, violin, and harpsichord play alone, producing a marvelous little trio with intertwining voices in a lively dialogue, played with shapely phrasing.

The program concluded with the two movement Concerto 3, arguably the most inventive of the six Brandenburgs. It features a string choir divided into three equal parts, creating a rich sound suggesting a much larger group of instruments. A violin solo, written by Bach for another occasion, was inserted in place of the second movement.

The concerto was stylishly played and provided a satisfying ending to the program.

The evening was a tour de force for the Society.

Though the group encountered a few problems with intonation and some loss of clarity in the dense tutti parts, particularly in the opening concerto, these were minor distractions and were certainly overshadowed by the buoyant rhythms, graceful phrasing and effective use of dynamics that pervaded their playing.

The Worcester Chamber Music Society is to be commended for providing the opportunity to hear a live presentation of four of these marvelous and too seldom heard works.

The standing ovation the group received demonstrated how much this performance was enjoyed.