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Chamber team touches all bases

MUSIC REVIEW

By John Zeugner Telegram & Gazette reviewer

WORCESTER— The four heaviest hitters of the Baroque era — Georg Philipp Telemann, Henry Purcell, Georg Friedrich Handel and Johann Sebastian Bach — were up to bat Saturday night in the First Baptist Church's Gordon Hall. The major players of the Worcester Chamber Music Society — Peter Sulski (violin/viola), Ian Watson (harpsichord), Krista Buckland Reisner (violin), Mark Berger (viola), Tracy Kraus (flute) and Maria Ferrante (soprano) — were supplemented by cellist David Russell and violinists Amy Rawstron and Angel Hernandez in a long, ambitious program carried off with characteristic joyous music-making.

An equally august quartet of veteran audience members — Tom Keil, Rick Kimball, Gene McCarthy and Lance Schachterle — pronounced the performances wondrously vital and interactive, supple and beguiling, although a couple of these fans fretted that paring down Bach did violence to his genius. Schachterle: "If Bach wanted to write a quintet, he would have easily done so." Kimball: "Is it really a concerto when it's two violins against three others?"

And beyond those fans, Sharon Strzalkowski, always the keenest ear in any audience, found Ferrante's voice pure and powerful, but not that night in the clearest articulation, or, she conceded, it may have been the acoustics of Gordon Hall. Who could have the cheek to quarrel with these mavens? Not this reviewer.

In fact, this reviewer agreed with Strzalkowski that the performances, already at the summit of pennant-winning professionalism, ascended to World Series perfection in the Handel Sonata for Violin and Continuo that opened the second half of the concert.

Reisner, Russell and Watson wove Handel's four movements into pure, exquisite magic, achieving in the largo a lush, lovely contrapuntal interplay between Reisner and Russell that was heart-rending.

It was a night for largos. The second movement of Bach's Concerto for two violins was another World Series moment, with the interplay of Reisner and Sulski sweetly mesmerizing. If the outer movements of the Bach were occasionally a little ragged, their energy and conviction easily carried the day. It was also a night for female performers, beginning with Tracy Kraus' always magisterial rendering of Telemann's Suite in A minor for flute and strings. Her flute work in the second movement achieved an amazingly pure, ethereal, rippling lilt, echoed furiously in the sixth movement and in the final conclusion — a stunning performance.

Similarly, Ferrante was in absolute control of her pitches (to grind the metaphor deeply into the infield grass), firing Papelbon fast and inside with Purcell's "I Attempt Love's Sickness to Fly," and then a brilliant change-up to almost cosmic sadness in "Dido's Lament" from Purcell's opera "Dido and Aeneas."

Finally, iron man of music Ian Watson provided bedrock harpsichord rhythm for six of the seven pieces, and all 18 of the movements, with enthusiastic energy and joyous technique — a Big Papi-in-his-heyday performance.

The concert concluded with a long-ball shot at Bach's Cantata 209 that almost made it out of the park. It was a near home run, all right, with Ferrante in even better voice, but the group may have lost some energy given the full nine innings of music. It cannot be said often enough: Worcester is incredibly lucky to have the musical talents of the Worcester Chamber Music Society and the Worcester Collegium so available in such ambitious, gorgeous programs. Their next performances are Jan. 17 at All Saints Church, Feb. 14 at Assumption College and May 16 at the First Unitarian Church.