

Review: Chamber Music in the Saal at Bethlehem Bach Festival a beautiful, intimate experience

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Special to The Morning Call

If one had to choose the instrument J.S. Bach loved the most for accompaniment of the human voice, it would probably be a tossup between the oboe d'amore and the viola d'amore - he scored exquisite duets for both. But if Friday's chamber music concert in the Saal at the Moravian Museum in Bethlehem is any indication, the viola d'amore was especially close to his heart.

The program, part of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem's 110th Bach Festival, featured the viola d'amore, lovely in both sound and appearance, in Baroque instrumental chamber works by Heinichen and Biber as well as in arias by Telemann and Bach. Instrumentalists were viola d'amore virtuosos Paul Miller and Maureen Murchie (who also performed on Baroque violin), joined by Mollie Glazer, cello and gamba, and Charlotte Mattax-Moersch, harpsichord.

Vocal soloists were soprano Agnes Zsigovics, tenor Benjamin Butterfield, and bass-baritone Dashon Burton. All of course are beloved Bach Choir regulars, but what really made this concert so special for me was actually hearing them sing with a small ensemble in the intimate confines of the Saal. The clarity of diction and sense of presence of all three was overwhelming - it was like attending a private recital in a living room.

Actually, make that an 18th century living room, since all the instruments were period-correct and in Baroque tuning. The viola d'amore is an especially beautiful instrument, with an intricately carved head (a blindfolded cupid), and seven playing strings with an equal number of "sympathetic" strings that resonate with them.

So what's love got to do with it, one might ask? In an engaging preconcert lecture, Miller explained that the sympathetic strings vibrate to the plucked strings much in the way a lover responds to his/her beloved. Also, the f-holes are shaped like flames, representing the flames of love. And as for that blindfold, well, love is blind, right?

No less than six viola d'amores were played during the performance. The reason for this arsenal of love, Miller explained, was that each instrument is tuned for the key of a particular piece, and it would take an ungodly amount of time to retune a single instrument for all six keys of the nine selections on the program.

Instrumental selections included a trio sonata by Heinichen, Miller's own transcription of Bach's D Minor Suite for Cello, and a rarely-heard partita for duo viola d'amores and continuo by Biber. In hearing the instrument by itself one could appreciate its unusual warm, sweet sound, a sound

that somehow seemed larger than what a single instrument would produce, yet very light and delicate.

Miller's performance of the Bach cello suite was a stunner, combining the depth and richness of a cello with an uncanny sense of detail and transparency. The Biber duo was another tour de force, with Miller and Murchie echoing and playing off each other, the resonances of their instruments interweaving in the form of an intricate dance.

It was in the arias where one could really understand why Bach so loved the viola d'amore for vocal accompaniment. Hearing Zsigovics in "Auch mit gedämpften" from Bach's Cantata BWV 36 was a sheer delight, the sweetness of the instrument beautifully complementing her lovely voice. Arias from Bach's "Saint John Passion" featured Burton in a deeply passionate "Betrachte, meine Seel" and Butterfield in a stormy and operatic "Erwäge wie sein blutgefärbte."

Kudos to Glazer and Mattax-Moersch for some very solid continuo work throughout, especially in accompanying Burton in "Meinen Jesum lass ich nicht" from Bach's Cantata BWV 98 with its especially intricate bass line. Here also Murchie demonstrated she's as much a virtuoso on Baroque violin as she is on viola d'amore.

The concert will be repeated at 4 p.m. Friday in the Saal at the Moravian Museum of Bethlehem as part of the Bethlehem Bach Festival, which continues through Saturday at Bethlehem venues. Tickets: \$28. Info: bach.org.

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