

The Boston Musical Intelligen

a virtual journal and essential blog of the classical music scene in greater Boston

Lee Eiseman, publisher; Robert Levin, advisor; David Moran, assisting editor; Bettina A. Norton, emerita editor

NEWS & FEATURES REVIEWS UPCOMING EVENTS

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

IN: REVIEWS

JUNE 19, 2017

So Many Keys to the Past, I

by DAVID MORAN

The musical times around and before J. S. Bach (1685-1750) got explored in fascinating detail last Thursday at First Lutheran Boston as part of this year's Early Music Festival. The three scholarly organists introduced composers from that century's worth of generations, three or four of them, who preceded papa Bach. Hearing the known and the lesser-known made for an instructive day.

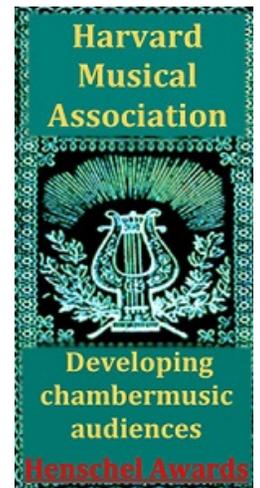
In "Bach and the Heritage from the North", rising French keyboardist **Benjamin Alard** seemed to take a while to settle in on the church's powerful Richards, Fowkes instrument. Matthias Weckmann's (1616-1674) Preambulum, Fantasia, and Canzona went haltingly, or, where not, the artist sounded scrambly. Alard's playing came together powerfully for Weckmann's Magnificat second toni, whose counterpoint pleased austere, as did Buxtehude's (1637-1707) moving paternal-funeral music on Luther's "Mit fried und freud ich fahr dahin" (Contrapunctus & Evolutio I and II). The composer's famous Passacaglia portends Bach's (making us realize both how Bach's is not *quite* the lightning it appears to be and also how the young man bounded over his influences); Alard did right by it.

Bach's G-major Fantasy (S.571, not the big one) felt wayward, however, and Johann Pachelbel's (1653-1706) "An Wasserflüssen Babylon" wanted flow. Johann Reincken's Chorale Fantasia on that tune seems endless, and Alard's odd bundlings and pauses made it even more interminable. This is, however, a piece Bach liked so much he copied it out for a teacher. Alard's recital ended with the master. Bach's C-major Fantasy (S.570) and Fugue (S.946, after Albinoni) showed spriteliness underlying less unevenness. For the S.653 "Wasserflüssen" the water had been turned on, and the concluding A-minor Prelude and Fugue (S.551), which features a touch of flash, likewise moved along.

I knew that some of Alard's recorded Bach courses excitingly, and he has admirably refined fingers, so I looked forward to his harpsichord recital closing the next day at the MFA. I asked a couple of organists in the large audience if the Richards, Fowkes was somewhat tough to negotiate; one felt it was a bit resistant, yes, while the other replied no, it's comfortable for the hands.

As a favored student of keyboardist Anton Heiller, who remains unmatched as to rhythmic strength and more, **Christa Rakich** knows all about forward motion and tactus. Rakich has been a prominent figure in the organ world hereabouts for decades. Her BEMF recital, "Those Wild and Crazy Guys", featured prominent Dutch composer and teacher Jan Sweelinck (1562-1621) and his "mentees" (actual students, or just influenced) Samuel Scheidt (1587-1654), Heinrich Scheidemann (~1595-1663), Melchior Schildt (~1592-1667), Franz Tunder (1614-1667), and Bach. Rakich spoke on each musician and handed out a sheet of themes for many of the pieces, which she then sang capably, being a working church MD (now in Connecticut).

Sweelinck the Dutch master's *Fantasia cromatica* was as advertised, full of color based on descending half-steps, texturally canonical (not a lot this day wasn't), majestically registered and played with nice chop even as modulating chords went by smoother. His following *Ballo de Granduca* (disputed, but who cares?) showed even more instrumental colors with boxed-off registrations. Scheidt's unconventionally multi-fugal "I'm wounded" Fantasy, focused, intense, was a steamroller of counterpoint (to paraphrase the performer), though not all that aching. Scheidemann's Magnificat VIII arrangement discontinuously unspooled its easy-listening sections, repetitive, deliberate, unto a welcome, unprepared stop. Schildt's Magnificat I



RECENT
COMMENTS

LouisArnold on [Lutenist Succeeds With Diminutions](#)

Alan Levitan on [Christmas Oratorio in Symphony Hall](#)

Joel Cohen on [Christmas Oratorio in Symphony Hall](#)

Alan Levitan on [Christmas Oratorio in Symphony Hall](#)

martin cohn on [Christmas Oratorio in Symphony Hall](#)

Thomas Dawkins on [Christmas Oratorio in Symphony Hall](#)

Terry Decima on [Faithful to Bach the Innovator](#)

Lee Eiseman on [Christmas Oratorio in Symphony Hall](#)

Joel Cohen on [Christmas Oratorio in Symphony Hall](#)

arrangement recited its strange segments, noodling busily, and sometimes tediously, from much to much less. Tunder's intricate Fantasy on "Komm, heiliger geist" may've been included chiefly for historical completion, that is, for his being father-in-law of (and succeeded by) Buxtehude. With the latter's Prelude in G minor we returned to a graver pleno world complete with pedal underpinning flying-hand dramas. This work's opening pages are a thrill, and Rakich pretty much met their force.

Withal, it was good prep for Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor (S.582). As everyone who knows it knows, the work, composed when Bach was in his 20s and following a 250-mile schlep to visit the much older Buxtehude, is made up of a memorable ground bass in triple time with 20 dancingly connected improvisational-sounding variations written above it. Each lasts ~23 seconds, depending on performer. After their thunderous end, Bach immediately launches a massive fugue. The Passacaglia augments, and then builds on, a simple theme borrowed from a French organ book of samples, and over its eight-minute length it becomes denser, deeper, fuller, louder, and more complex. By the last three congested variations it is close to unbearable in power and magnificence.

The directly linked fugue is partly based on the same theme and, after releasing the intensity of the Passacaglia, undertakes its own complex growth and lays out its own potent countersubject logic, and six minutes later achieves its own staggering climaxes.

The 25-year-old may well have used this piece as a competition showoff over the next few years, and he also likely revisited it decades later. Some scholars have suggested that the fugue was written first, forcibly restraining the multiple similar ideas in multiple similar voices. If so, we may note that the Passacaglia "completes" the fugue's processes and thinking, to produce a fabulously sustained and organized symphony — which on the vast scape of music history is, to my mind, a landmark quite on the order of the *Eroica* a century later and the *Rite of Spring* another century-plus after that.

Rakich rode it expertly, with growing tread, driving through the triplets and all else with no speedups, no slowdowns, accumulating power such that it seems the thing will never bloody stop, until it does. At each of the two conclusions she knew how to round toward home atop this tremendous machine. A hair-raising experience.

* * *

Cornell professor and eminent Bach musicologist **David Yearsley** is a Rakich student. Attend him if he is ever speaking on music history. His recital comprised the actual and the imaginatively embellished "Organ Contests of Dresden: 1650, 1717, and 1789", and his fascinating background talk may be read [here](#). The events combined national pride, "welcome, stranger," with "check out our instrument and especially my footwork on its big pedals".

The 1650 show was more cooperative than contested. The northerly, stern-sounding, erudite Weckmann's Fantasy ex D minor, and his second and seventh verses, pedal-showy, on the chorale "Es ist das heil", contrasted with the improvisatory Toccata III (second book) of Johann Froberger (1616-1667), who was Viennese and a student of Frescobaldi in Rome. To Froberger's "Milkmaid" Variations Yearsley added his own half-step-riffing ones, which to my ear almost permuted into "Ah! vous dirai-je, maman...?"

Bach's PR-minded sons famously said that the 1717 Dresden organ competition invitation resulted in the older contestant Louis Marchand (1669-1732) bailing out after hearing dad play. This is probably a libel. In any event, Yearsley has them meet. Bach offered his densely fugal, somewhat Frenchy Fantasy in C minor (S.652), and the professor rendered it not notably smoothly but with propulsion. The ensuing S.526 Sonata in the same key sounded indelicate to my ear yet otherwise satisfactory. Marchand, whose music Bach in fact admired, strutted his Catholic stuff by way of several of his *Pièces d'Orgue*, and in Yearsley's hands (and feet) the mighty opening *Plein jeu* pointed toward Bach's mammoth G-major Fantasy (S.572) of a few years later.

The final showdown, a 1789 visit to Dresden by Bach-student student Johann Wilhelm Häßler (1747-1822) coincidental with one by the ever snarky Mozart (1756-1791) — "Häßler's famous footwork actually sucks whereas mine rocks even though Vienna organs ain't got no pedal", etc. — let Yearsley get all ballparky with selections from Häßler's 48 Little Organ Pieces. They were toodly, dissonant, burbly, returning to fits and starts and other chopped moments and materials. The day closed with the organist's transcription of Mozart's K.608 Fantasy in F Minor (originally for mechanical organ), making it into a monument of power, cogency, even brilliance (if not the last word in ensemble), also harmonically advanced — 1789 sure sounded a long way from earlier in the century and before that. Between those two offerings Yearsley gave us more Bach, the S.540 Fugue in F Major. Again it needed longer line and phrasing, I thought, but he did really get going with it, in all of its determination.

David Moran has been an occasional Boston-area music critic for 45 years, with special interest in the keyboard.

Share this:



No Comments

No comments yet.

[RSS feed for comments on this post.](#)

Sorry, this comment forum is now closed.



Fowkes organ in First Lutheran Church