



OBF ARTISTIC DIRECTOR MATTHEW HALLS REHEARSES AN ENSEMBLE.

Other performers included soprano Sophie Junker. I loved the intimacy, but could care less about the religion. And while the supporting cast of soloists was overall strong, the proximity brought an audible “wow” from my lips when countertenor Reginald Mobley, a big, solid human being, took to the stage only to emit the most heavenly alto.

And in the end, this is heavenly music, dense to our modern ears but nonetheless a marvel — each musical phrasing a complete sentence, each sentence a new idea. And it all came from within the head of one person who with his music tried to pay tribute to heaven but in doing so created a kind of heaven on earth.

Berwick Academy: ‘Explore German Baroque with Monica Huggett’

Not all Baroque is heavy, and *Explore German Baroque*, also at Beall Hall, was a light affair next to the *Passion*. Meant as an overview of German Baroque composers from Bach’s era, the program included Telemann, Fasch, Graun and Bach’s own son Wilhelm Friedemann.

In a timeless story of son rejecting the father, Friedemann chafed at the Baroque’s religious *diktat*. Reading the program notes, this cost him several jobs, proving that even in the 18th century musicians were hard to employ — rock ‘n’ roll will never die.

Central to *Explore German Baroque* was the appearance of British conductor and leading Baroque violinist Monica Huggett, artistic director of Portland Baroque Orchestra and an OBF regular. Before the show she apologized for the long program, explaining with a smile if anyone had to get up and leave, she understood.

The Goldberg Variations with a rapper may seem as desperate our great works, and opening up the canon to pop — and all its — may just be the answer. Bach’s music is timelessly beautiful.

“We won’t be offended,” she said, before launching into a concert of adagios, fugues, concertos and suites tending toward the lighter side of Baroque. The ensembles — no, I’ll call them “bands” — stood on stage as they might’ve in a salon, cheated toward one another instead of the audience, with Huggett “leading” but not exactly conducting — occasionally swinging an arm here or there for emphasis, not so much to guide the musicians as to express her physical involvement with the work: less a conductor, more a rock band’s front-person, providing visual flourish to the sound.

A good front-person has long been my favorite part of the rock band moment, and I liked seeing that thread emphasized in this performance — a time-travel link to the audiences that took in this work in their own era.

And the net effect recalled to my mind little legacies of Baroque I feel can be heard in pop music from The Beatles or in general the style known sometimes as “Baroque pop.” It’s my favorite sound — the dazzling mathematical yet musically intricate nature of Baroque thinking made clearer in the smaller ensembles: babbling brooks instead of roaring oceans.

(Re)Discovery Series, Part I St. John Passion

Can I mention that, after catching part one of the [Re] Discovery Series, I have a little man-crush on OBF artistic director Matthew Halls? Oh, the British accent, oh the egghead musical terminology in an Italian accent, oh the sport coat.

But more on that later.

Bach wrote five passions. Only two survive in completion: *St. Matthew* and *St. John*. OBF’s [Re]Discovery Series broke down *St. John* into digestible nuggets, with Halls offering a little lecture on musical points that give the passion its genius. I caught only Part I, which also featured guest conductors from OBF’s conducting master class.

Halls made it back from his familial obligations to lead this performance and lecture. And man, is he an engaging and informative speaker (as I make a little heart-shape with my fingers across my chest). Halls points out that Lent was a time of fasting, and Bach intended his Passions to be auditory feasts for the parishioners.

Beall Hall’s pipe organ was played athletically and