

Music review: Rebel Ensemble for Baroque Music

By LARRY FUCHSBERG, Special to the Star Tribune

Published: April 1, 2003

Nicolaus Bruhns, Franz Tunder and Johann Rosenmüller are hardly among music's household names. Yet these 17th century composers, together with their somewhat better-known colleagues Johann Froberger, Heinrich Biber and Dietrich Buxtehude, supplied the scores for an ear-opening performance Sunday by the Rebel Ensemble for Baroque Music in the penultimate concert of this season's Music in the Park Series, at St. Anthony Park United Church of Christ in St. Paul.

I might as well confess that I've given not a moment's attention to these learned Germans since slogging through graduate school in the waning days of the Nixon administration. Truth be told, I paid them scant heed then. The explanation is simple: No one played this music with anything like the Rebel's imagination and intensity. If programmed at all, it was performed with an attitude of reverential, almost terminal earnestness, as if defying the listener's heart to beat faster.

The Rebel's remarkable players remind us that much baroque music is edgy, charged, sensuous, even bizarre. It explores the extremes of feeling and expression. The group takes its name, in a spirit of pun, from the wildly inventive French baroque composer Jean-Féry Rebel (pronounced ruh-BELL). Based in New York City, the Rebel group varies in size and instrumentation, expanding into a small baroque orchestra when required. On this occasion it consisted of violinists Jörg-Michael Schwarz and Karen Marie Marmer, cellist John Moran and organist Dongsok Shin.

Their absorbing program Sunday mixed sacred and secular, vocal and instrumental works. Particularly striking were the string pyrotechnics of Biber and Bruhns -- who, legend has it, could play the violin, sing and accompany himself on the organ pedals at the same time -- and the plaintive, often dramatic emotionalism of Rosenmüller. The ensemble was joined by the outstanding young bass Curtis Streetman. Streetman's powerful but agile bass coped impressively with the music's stylistic and technical demands.

Related through their training and even through marriage -- Tunder was Buxtehude's father-in-law -- these composers have overlapping vocabularies. One finds similar turns of musical phrase in pieces by different hands. Apart from Rosenmüller, who escaped to Venice after being arrested on suspicion of homosexuality, this German school labored far from the hub of musical activity. (The Baroque was a period of Italian ascendancy.) The center of musical gravity would move north of the Alps in the following century, and this cluster of musicians helped prepare the shift.

Perhaps the best reason to get acquainted with these Northern Baroque worthies is that Bach stood on their shoulders: He studied for a time with Buxtehude and almost certainly knew the others' work. That's closer to immortality than most composers ever come.

-- Larry Fuchsberg is a St. Paul writer.