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MUSIC REVIEW

Grandeur of the Baroque Tempered by the Renaissance

By ALLAN KOZINNI

Most of the musicians in the New York Collegium are familiar to anyone who follows the period-instrument world, and several of the principal players have been involved with other attempts to establish a period-instrument orchestra in New York over the last 20 years. Why those earlier efforts have either foundered or have had trouble finding dependable financial support is a mystery, given the popularity of period-instrument performances. The best-case scenario, of course, would be to have several competing ensembles, each approaching the repertoire from a different angle. But one is a start, and at the moment the Collegium seems to be on solid ground.

The orchestra made the interesting and sensible decision to present programs of sacred music in a church, and secular music in a concert hall. This year, spirituality had the final word: the Collegium ended its New York season on Sunday evening (there was a repeat of its program on Monday in Boston) with works by Georg Muffat, Agostino Steffani and Heinrich von Biber at St Vincent Ferrer Church. Gustav Leonhardt, the Dutch early-music specialist who is listed as the orchestra's founding music director, was on the podium, and the orchestra and its choir were supplemented by a slate of fine vocal soloists.

The program, called "Founding Fathers of the High Baroque," offered a fairly easy music history lesson. Muffat's accomplishment was taking the concerto grosso style, popular in Italy, and establishing it in Germany, grafting on some French elements along the way. He was represented by two orchestral Sonatas (in A minor and C minor) that use elements of the concerto grosso style. Mr. Leonhardt conveyed the variety within them, giving the Grave movements a smooth-textured serenity, and using dynamics to illuminate the contours of the faster movements.

Mr. Leonhardt's tempos were decidedly moderate, and if one wished for greater clarity of texture in the string playing, it seemed that this was an area in which the resonant acoustics of the church were exacting in toll. The sacred pieces fared better in that regard: the same resonance that rendered the orchestral fabric indistinct amplified the voices and gave them a rich glow.

Steffani was more conservative in his *Stabat Mater*, one hears Baroque grandeur tempered by echoes of the less showy, more affecting Renaissance choral style. His setting of the *Stabat Mater* in 12 sections that flow together seamlessly, its verses distributed among solo voices, ensembles of soloists and the full choir. Biber's *Requiem in F minor* bears traces of Renaissance sensibilities as well, but is more openly contrapuntal. Its heart is an unusually colorful and expansive *Dies Irae*.

In both works, the most distinctive singers were Susanne Ryden and Susanne Peck, sopranos with a lovely, clear tone that is perfectly suited to early music, and Curtis Streetman, a bass with a strong and uncommonly deep resonant sound. John Elwes and Marc Molomot, tenors, and Dana Marsh, the male alto, also sang their lines with graceful assurance.