

New York City Clarion Music Society

I remember recordings of the Clarion Music Society from the 1950s when Newell Jenkins was in charge. He had an interest in Italian classical symphonics, and his records introduced us to a number of unknown but worthy masters. My ticket to this concert put me next to a woman who was one of his colleagues and had a number of anecdotes. Sorry, there's no room in a short review for them. What a pity!

Clarion's May 29 program called "Russian Jewels from the Court of Catherine the Great" began with the chamber choir performing a choral concerto by Dmitri Bortniansky (1751-1825), who helped develop the marvelous school of Russian choral composition. This work showed off the choir's unusually well-balanced tone, and the music showed imaginative word painting and a rich sonority that one hardly expects to encounter in 18th Century music. Stephen Fox conducted with precision and expression, and the lovely acoustics of Weill Recital Hall contributed to the intense effect.

The mood changed abruptly as Ilya Peltayev stepped to the harpsichord for a sonata by Bortniansky's teacher, Baldassare Galuppi (1706-85). This curious improvisatory three-movement piece, somewhat in the manner of CPE Bach, seemed quite mad. It contrasted effectively with Bortniansky's choral work.

Then the string ensemble presented an aria and chorus from an opera by Yevstigney Fomin (1761-1800). Perhaps I was too involved adjusting to the blend of sounds, but I didn't manage to detect the 5/4 meter the program notes mentioned, nor did I find Fomin a par-

ticularly unusual composer, lovely though the music was.

The instrumentalists got to shine in the next piece, the first movement of a piano trio by Anton Eberl (1765-1807). This impressive work showed an imagination and instrumental character Beethoven would have been pleased with. It is a shame Eberl died so young. He was clearly on the way to greatness.

The first half ended with another choral concerto, this time by Maxim Berezovsky (1745-77). His work was comparable to Bortniansky's and deals with old age in a very expressive way; it was a joy to hear the choir sounding like a single multi-pitched voice again. This composer also died too young.

After intermission we heard more Berezovsky. What was originally another a cappella work was turned into a cantata with instruments by Giuseppe Sarti (1729-1802). Since Russian orthodox services never used instruments until well into the 20th Century, this was music that could be played only in Catherine's court, where religious works were sometimes arranged for secular performances. I wish we could have heard Berezovsky's original as well, since Sarti transformed it into an Italian cantata so effectively that it was hard to imagine what the original was like.

A group of instrumental works followed. Poletaev moved to the fortepiano for a sonata (or perhaps a movement of one) by Bortniansky, a dramatic piece played with great individuality and rubato, sometimes at the expense of technical accuracy, though my sympathies were with the player, who changed instruments every few minutes, switching his mental state from soloist to basso continuo to something in between.

Then violinist Cynthia Roberts turned to a Berezovsky sonata, assisted by Poletaev and cellist Katherine Rietman. Using fortepiano rather than harpsichord accompaniment, it sounded like a real violin sonata with most of the melodies, imaginative double stops, and virtuoso writing played by the violin in a style recalling Haydn. This was a new side of Berezovsky to me, and a welcome one.

The string section then formed itself into a string quartet for what seemed like a two-movement work by Anton Ferdinand Titz (1742-1811), a composer from Gertnary who went to Russia in 1771 and more-or-less ran Catherine's music program from then on. This was another beautifully written, original ear-opener, full of imagination, with equal employment for all four instruments. If this was Titz's Opus 1 and he wrote more than nine, I would like to know where they have been all my life!

The technically impressive instrumentalists seemed to be enjoying themselves, though

their emphasis on early-music performance practice seemed a little self-conscious for ideal sound. Flat no-vibrato sound needs a character of its own to make its points; just doing it on principle is not enough.

The concert closed with a suite of excerpts from the opera *The Rival Brothers* by Bortniansky, performed by several vocal soloists, chorus, and all of the instrumentalists. The fortepianist had a prominent but unusual role--what was he doing? It wasn't a continuo part. Was he filling in absent parts for wind instruments? Or was this what Bortniansky actually wrote? I wish the program notes had clarified that point. At any rate, it was a lively and interesting score. Lauren Bradley's expressive soprano, Drew Martin's accurate tenor, and Craig Phillips's powerful bass were especially impressive.

For me, the stars of this concert were the choir and conductor-programmer-annotator Stephen Fox. The concert introduced me to composers I have missed and showed me new sides to composers I thought I knew. That has been characteristic of Clarion's approach from the beginning. I only wish that we had been able to hear complete works more, not just movements, though that was obviously not the goal of this concert. Let's give Clarion a summer festival where they can spread out at length!

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