

Arts/Entertainment

The London Baroque Quartet: musical wit and passion

By JEFFRY STEELE
Special to The Recorder

DEERFIELD — The quartet London Baroque gave an impressive concert titled "The Virtuoso Baroque" at the Old Brick Church last Friday. This was the second of this season's Music in Deerfield concert series.

Whatever your understanding of Baroque music or performance practice, what immediately strikes one on seeing these four English men playing together — on two violins, cello and harpsichord — is what a good time they are having.

They began with Biber's Partida VI from "Armonia Artificiosa, whose title — though it may sound like the name of one of those P.D.Q. Bach farces — apparently refers to the violins begin retuned to an open chord. Breaking the ice right from the opening measures, violinist Richard Gwilt was clearly up to something — acting out the "one-upmanship" between two violin parts as would a professional clown.

Soon his opponent, Andrew Manze, was responding to Gwilt's impish persona with another of his own, seeming desperate to keep pace. You could almost hear them saying to each other: "Oh yeah? Think you're so great? Just watch

this!" Near the end of the finale, they suddenly brought the tempo to a snail's pace (perhaps one-third of what it had been) — leaving listeners in suspense as to what was actually happening until, by speeding up gradually, they reached the fast tempo again.

In his remarks before the "Manchester" Sonata No. 2 by Vivaldi, harpsichordist Richard Egarr told us why it often sounds as though Vivaldi "wrote the same piece 800 times." Apparently the composer could maximize his earnings by selling a manuscript to one patron as "an exclusive," and then write out virtually the same piece for someone else to whom he also charged for exclusive rights to the manuscript.

This D minor harpsichord and violin sonata was discovered in 1973, not having been heard for 250 years. Egarr changed frequently from double manual (when twice the number of strings are plucked per note, half sounding up the octave) to single manual, even for short phrases. That technique, added to his variety of touch and articulation, almost gave one the feeling he was getting the sort of dynamic contrast available on the piano.

Egarr followed with a solo piece, the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue.

Music review

He conjectured that the moody and impulsive phrasing in the first section may have reflected Bach's feelings after the recent death of his wife. Egarr explained that his instrument was not tuned in the "communist manner" of equal temperament, in which the interval between adjacent notes is identical in all cases. He played a C-chord, which rang clear, and then a C-sharp chord, which sounded very out of tune with itself. Bear in mind, he told us, that "if something sounds a bit nasty, it's probably on purpose."

My ears didn't mind this tuning (which he told me afterward was known as French ordinaire) for the ensemble pieces; but in this Bach solo, modulations to distant keys were a little painful. I also did not hear the seeming control over dynamics noted above and realized that this had been part of an illusion the string players had helped create.

The players were all back on stage to end the first half with the Handel Trio Sonata, OP. 2, No. 4. Cellist Charles Medlam wanted to be sure to correct the opus number from that printed on the program so that "if it appeals to you, you may purchase the correct compact disc." The violinists were engaged in musical banter again, making much of a single note with which one instrument would interrupt all the others.

With the music of Boccherini — the Cello Sonata in A — London Baroque brought us into the early

Classical period. This was the first repertoire for the cello, Medlam explained, that made extensive use of its highest register. For this reason, Boccherini is known for having "invented the thumb" in that the thumb is placed down across the strings — much like a temporary guitar capo — in the rendering of high passages. Medlam did not get every note in tune, but he mentioned to me later that the weather's effect on his instrument was a factor in this.

Before the Sonata for two violins by Kaspar Fritz, Richard Gwilt talked about their instruments. His violin, though built in 1660, had to be rebuilt to its original configuration — after having been modernized in the intervening years. The string players all use gut strings and baroque bows — the latter being lighter than modern bows and having less even dynamics across the bow stroke. Gwilt invited us to listen for yodeling and cuckoos in this Swiss composition.

The concert closed with a Trio Sonata by Leclair, which contained two thrilling fugues. The audience would not let them go without an encore; and they obliged with a movement from a Bach Trio Sonata for organ.

Their Music in Deerfield performance was the last of a short U.S. tour; and the performers agreed afterward that we had been the best audience. I would recommend to anyone the many CDs by these fine players — both in this ensemble and as individuals — as I imagine these recordings would reflect the special combinations of musical wit and passion that we experienced last Friday.