

MUSIC REVIEW

Austerity, exuberance mark Collegium works

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June 15, 1999

The final concert of the New York Collegium's inaugural Boston season brought forward two choral works few in the audience could have heard, or even heard of, before - a "Stabat Mater" by Agostino Steffani (1654 - 1728) and a Requiem by Heinrich von Biber (1644 - 1704). These "founding fathers of the high baroque," to borrow the program title, were joined by Georg Muffat (1653 - 1704), two of whose sonatas for strings ("Quis hic?" and "Victoria Maestra") framed the Steffani piece.

The two choral works stood in strong contrast. Steffani's "Stabat Mater" is austere; the "Requiem" is as exuberantly, extravagantly imaginative as one would expect from the composer's celebrated "Mystery" sonatas for solo violin.

The New York Collegium's founding music director, Gustav Leonhardt, is both extravagant and austere, so he was well-matched to these works. The celebrated patriarch of the early-music movement arrived onstage looking spry, trim, and elegant in his three-piece suit; Leonhardt looked very much like the late, white-haired photographs of the composer Maurice Ravel, another precise sensualist. Leonhardt has often appeared here as a harpsichordist, seldom as a conductor, but he's the same musician in everything he does. His gestures are abrupt, angular and emphatic, even in quiet music, but there's a lot of information in them, and all of it is pertinent.

Steffani sets each strophe of the poignant "Stabat Mater" poem independently, moving flexibly among solo voices, small ensembles and chorus, with all these forces interacting variously with the orchestra. The response to text is specific and intense, the harmonies chromatically clashing, an effect intensified by the rather peculiar vocal sound that Leonhardt favors. His singers, soloists and ensemble, sang with a straight, piercing, almost honking, tone that does not lend itself to

dynamic contrast, coloristic variety, or even balance. Nor, really, does it lend itself to ensemble singing because the most minute deviations of intonation make effects even more painfully grinding than the composer intended. Swedish early-music soprano Susanne Ryden was given advance star billing, but her part was no more prominent than anyone else's. Curtis Streetman, who let his voice sprawl in an earlier concert this season, kept to the straight and narrow last night, and made an impressive stab at low Ds that would send most basses rushing for hormone shot. The tenor John Elwes was more securely in control than his colleague Marc Molomot; Susanne Peck led the work off firmly.

The two Muffat Sonatas represent an early fusion of French and Italian styles. They are vigorously and variously written for strings in concerto grosso style. The theorbo of Richard Savino produced punctuation and italics, the organ of James David Christie sustenance. The string playing, led by Joerg-Michael Schwarz was energetic if not always immaculately tuned.

The Biber Requiem sounded like a masterpiece recovered. Written late in Biber's life for the Salzburg cathedral, the piece has majesty, breadth, and intimacy; it is also vividly pictorial and theatrical, and after the polyphonic terrors of the day of judgment, eternal light sounds very agreeable indeed, even jolly. Leonhardt led a performance of conviction and drama, although one wished at moments for a less constricted and constricting tonal quality. The founding president of the New York Collegium, Michael S. Feldman, asked in advance for a tribute of silence at the end; the performance itself earned it.