

December 14, 2015

The Brandenburgs @ Chamber Music Society



Above: by Séraphine de Senlis (French, 1864–1942), inspired by Bach

Sunday December 13th, 2015 - **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's** annual *Brandenburgs* concerts are a highlight of the classical music season. Each year, the Society assembles an ensemble from among its stellar roster of artists to perform the six *concerti* which Bach had presented as a set to Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg, in 1721. The Margrave apparently never paid Bach for these works, perhaps because he suspected that the *concerti* were simply revisions of older pieces from the composer's catalog and had not been penned specially to honor him.

The Society's *Brandenburgs* concerts are so enticing that a third performance is now necessary to accommodate the demand for tickets. Extra rows of seats were installed at Alice Tully Hall, which seemed full to bursting as the house lights went down.



Above: harpsichordist Kenneth Weiss, in an Arthur Forjanel portrait

I'd love to include photos here of every artist who took part in this evening's concert - they certainly deserve it! - but I haven't time to search them all out. However, Kenneth Weiss, who ran the six-concerto harpsichord marathon in high style, truly merits an image...especially since much of the evening he was obscured from our view by his fellow musicians. His fabulous playing in the 5th concerto was an outstanding treat in an evening full of top-flight music-making.

But to start at the beginning, the 1st concerto came first tonight. It boasts the *Brandenburgs'* largest complement of players (13) and the only appearance in the concert of the duetting horns - Julie Landsman and Jennifer Montone - plus a trio of oboes: James Austin Smith, Randall Ellis, and Stephen Taylor. With Daniel Phillips presiding as *violino primo*,

this baker's dozen of players wove the magical textures of the music with a pleasing mixture of vitality and charm. Mr. Phillips was at his most persuasive in the *adagio*, and Marc Goldberg's bassoon sounded with amiable richness of tone. The high horns had their work cut out for them, and made me dizzy with their vibrant harmonics.

Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 is the only one of these concerti that includes no violins: it is instead a viola paradise, to which Paul Neubauer and Richard O'Neill brought incredibly dulcet tone and stylistic refinement. In the first movement, Bach gives his viola duo a real workout. The speediest of passages were delivered in neat-as-a-pin fashion whilst the contrasted personalities of the two violists as they continually bested one another in an amiable duel was something to see, and of course to hear. Mr. O'Neill opened the *adagio* with a pliant theme, taken up by Mr. Neubauer; the sheer beauty of their entwined voices made my companion tear up. Filling out the *adagio's* sonic colour scheme, cellist Inbal Segev and the splendid *bassocantante* of Joseph Conyers made the *continuo* richly resonant. In the concluding movement, Mssrs. Neubauer and O'Neill carry on a viola dialogue with much back and forth; their playing elicited a very warm audience response. I must mention also cellists Jakob Koranyi and Daniel McDonough who completed the choir, and Mr. Weiss's ever-cordial harpsichord.

For the *2nd Brandenburg*, the winds take over. Brilliance in the high register from trumpeter Brandon Ridenour; his playing really pricked up the ear with his stratospheric roulades. In the second movement, the pure, sweet sounds of Sooyun Kim's flute took on an almost spiritual quality; violinist Chad Hoopes and oboist James Austin Smith joined Ms. Kim in a heartfelt blend of timbres, with Jakob Koranyi's cello adding an alto richness. Violinists Erin Keefe and Paul Huang made their first appearances of the evening here - both will shine brightly in the concert's second half - with Mssrs. Neubauer, Goldberg, and Conyers rounding out the impressive ensemble.

Following the interval, it was the harpsichord's turn to shine in the *5th Brandenburg*. Mr. Weiss played the long cadenza with sterling precision and grace, and a delightful command of dynamics. The audience seemed to collectively hold their breath as Mr. Weiss's hands sailed up and down the keyboard, summoning up the sounds that we so identify with the Baroque period. Violinist Erin Keefe and flautist Demarre McGill (brother of clarinetist Anthony McGill - what talented siblings!) played deftly in the opening *allegro* and serenely in the *affetuoso* second movement where their voices were finely underscored by the harpsichord. The complimentary string quartet consisted of Mr. Phelps, Mr. Neubauer, Ms. Segev, and Mr. Conyers. Many bravos rang out for Mr. Weiss at the close of this work.

The suave-toned Ms. Keefe took the lead in the *3rd Brandenburg*, which features trios of violins, violas, and cellos: Chad Hoopes and Paul Huang joined Ms. Keefe; Daniel Phillips switched from violin to viola here to commune with Mssrs. Neubauer and O'Neill' and the three cellists were Ms. Segev, Mr. Koranyi, and Daniel McDonough. Providing a rich bass line, Mr. Conyers again excelled and Mr. Weiss kept up his inspiring work at the keyboard.

For the concluding *4th Brandenburg*, the Society had yet another holiday gift up their sleeve: the young violinist [Paul Huang](#) - who made such an extraordinary impression at his [Morgan Library recital](#) earlier this year - demonstrated his supple tone and command of cascading, high-speed runs in a luxuriant performance. Paul manages to keep his sound rich and resonant even in the fastest passages, and everything was vividly clear and also wonderfully expressive. This concerto featured some shimmeringly *de Luxe* flute harmonies from Ms. Kim and Mr. McGill - so lovely to hear - and ensemble playing with a Cartier glow from Mssrs. Hoopes, Phillips, O'Neill, Koranyi, Conyers and Weiss.

In their programme note welcoming us tonight, the Society's artistic directors Wu Han and David Finckel spoke of the tragedies that have shaken the world in recent weeks. Their hope that the light of great music would help to banish the threat of darkness was surely fulfilled in this concert.

I must mention the very young man sitting in front of us. He was perhaps nine or ten years old, and of course we were thinking he might be a fidgety distraction to the music. Instead he sat perfectly still, in his crisp white shirt, clearly savoring every bit of the Bach on offer, and

applauding eagerly as each concerto ended. A model concert-goer then: he could set an example for all of us.

And now, a thank you to each of the generous players of the CMS 2015 *Brandenburgs* ensemble for bringing joy to the world:

- [Kenneth Weiss](#) ,harpsichord
- [Chad Hoopes](#) , violin
- [Paul Huang](#) , violin
- [Erin Keefe](#) , violin
- [Daniel Phillips](#) , violin
- [Paul Neubauer](#) , viola
- [Richard O'Neill](#) , viola
- [Jakob Koranyi](#) , cello
- [Daniel McDonough](#) , cello
- [Inbal Segev](#) , cello
- [Joseph Conyers](#) , double bass
- [Sooyun Kim](#) , flute
- [Demarre McGill](#) , flute
- [Randall Ellis](#) , oboe
- [James Austin Smith](#) , oboe
- [Stephen Taylor](#) , oboe
- [Marc Goldberg](#) , bassoon
- [Julie Landsman](#) , horn
- [Jennifer Montone](#) , horn
- [Brandon Ridenour](#) ,trumpet