

PREVIEW: Boston Baroque goes to 'the outer limit'

By Keith Powers, Daily News Correspondent

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Many musicians have limits, and for a lot of them it's Beethoven. While that might be the case for Martin Pearlman's Boston Baroque, it's not what you think.

"Beethoven is on the outer limit of what we do," says the group's founder and music director. "After that, I feel there are diminishing returns and that the differences are not that great."

Pearlman's "diminishing returns" have nothing to do with the work's difficulties - there are plenty of them. He's talking about period instrument performance - Boston Baroque's specialty. With Boston Baroque's repertory - "basically any music from the 1600s to 1820," Pearlman points out - applying the ideas of what composers and performers did in their own time, and using the same instruments they would have played, brings a genuine quality and historic insight to those compositions.

With Beethoven, it's trickier. Certainly performances, and instruments, were different in Beethoven's time, the early 1800s. "There have been developments in instruments all the way into the 20th century," Pearlman says. "And there are period orchestras that have performed even later music than Beethoven's."

But in fact, apart from a period performance by the Boston-based ensemble Grand Harmonie two years ago in New Jersey, "this opera basically hasn't been done before like this," he says.

So what does period performance, when it comes to Beethoven, actually mean? First off, the use of natural horns - those beastly instruments without valves that rely on the player's embouchure, and their hands inserted into the bell, to achieve their pitches. And the rest of Pearlman's orchestra also performs entirely on early instruments - Baroque strings, winds and percussion - as well. "The balance is different than modern performances too," Pearlman says. "The way the woodwinds blend with the strings - really a sweet blend."

But for listeners, the biggest difference will not be the instruments, according to Pearlman, but the staging.

"We're playing in Jordan Hall," he says, "a very intimate space. But we also have a number of Met singers as soloists, and the orchestra is right onstage - not stuck in the pit. When the orchestra is going crazy, you feel it. It's not only the sound, but you see it as well."

Pearlman's top-of-the-line soloists include soprano Wendy Bryn Harmer, who sings the title role, and tenor William Burden, in the role of her beloved, Florestan. Tenor Andrew Stenson (Jacquino), soprano Anna Christy (Marzeline), bass Nathan Stark (Rocco), bass Brian Kontes (Don Fernando) and bass-baritone Mark Walters (Don Pizzaro) fill out the solo ranks.

The opera is not fully staged, although there will be costumes, and some acting. "There really isn't quite a term for what we do," Pearlman says. "It's more acted than some, and the costumes are there. It doesn't have a big set, obviously. We call it semi-staged, but it's hard to define. The orchestra is front and center though, and the singers are acting around them."

Pearlman is also keen on the timeliness of "Fidelio." "It's a political opera," he says. "It deals with things people think about these days - serious things, like tyranny, and liberation and heroism. Even when it was first written, it was performed at the Congress of Vienna, when they were trying to figure out what to make of Europe after Napoleon was defeated. And it was the first opera that was performed after World War II, when the houses in Europe all reopened. It has that kind of political resonance."

Boston Baroque, Martin Pearlman conducting, performs Beethoven's "Fidelio" on April 13 and 15 in Jordan Hall. For tickets and information call 617-987-8600 or visit www.bostonbaroque.org.

Boston Baroque performs "Fidelio"

WHEN: April 13, 7:30 p.m. April 15, 3 p.m.

WHERE: Jordan Hall, 30 Gainsborough St., Boston

TICKETS: \$25-\$90

INFO: 617-987-8600. www.bostonbaroque.org

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