



“Greatest Hits of 1720”: from Bach to the Toys

Monday

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By Keith Powers / Contributing writer

HYANNIS – Maestro Jung-Ho Pak loves to tell stories. The music director of the Cape Symphony told one, with his orchestra, about baroque music Sunday afternoon at the Barnstable Performing Arts Center.

Not the boring baroque story you might expect. Not the one about how it was so long ago, and Bach was this, and Handel was that, and instruments were lousy and weird, and the guys had powdered hair.

He told a real story. Actually, a couple of them. How baroque music was like jazz. How French baroque sounded, and Italian, and German – and American (with living proof). And how the baroque was really romantic for a long time, until the 1970s or so.

And most fun of all, how a Motown group called the Toys knew a really good Bach tune when they heard it. But it wasn’t really Bach. That was just part of the story.

Pak called the performance “The Greatest Hits of 1720,” after an album of the same name from the 1970s. The once-popular album gussied up baroque compositions, mostly with lush, over-orchestrated treatments, and turned them into contemporary hits.

Pak turned them back into real music. Counting down the “Greatest Hits,” he led the orchestra, helped immensely by his talented principal chairs, through now-familiar works like Bach’s “Air” on the G String, Pachelbel’s Canon, and Mouret’s Rondeau (the “Masterpiece Theatre” theme).

It was generally a pared-down version of the CSO – smaller sets of the ensemble, often left to their own devices by Pak, who would introduce the music and then leave the podium. Keyboardist Donald Enos played a major role, switching from baroque music on the harpsichord (conducting at the same time), to jazz chords on the piano, to continuo on the organ. Concertmaster Jae Cosmos Lee stylishly turned out numerous solos: Corelli, Albinoni's Adagio, Bach's "Air." Principal oboe Elizabeth Mitnik Doriss also took center stage, joining Lee for a Bach double concerto, and carving out the "Masterpiece Theatre" theme with principal trumpet Kyle Spraker.

Pak asked flutist Wendy Rolfe to share her expertise in the baroque – and beyond. In an extended discussion on ornamentation, improvisation and the freedoms that both baroque music and contemporary jazz offer to instrumentalists, Rolfe played music ranging from Telemann to Claude Bolling. It was a beautifully presented and informative set.

Pak engaged in "Stump the Audience" at one point. After several examples showing Italian, German and French baroque styles, he played another, and asked everyone to guess its origin. After a roomful of wrong answers, he brought the actual composer – Bobby Bancalari – to the stage to explain why a young American would revisit baroque styles.

Never heard of the Toys? You've heard of their one hit, "Lovers Concerto" ("How gentle is the rain..."). Pak played a throwback clip of the Motown girl-group, and then lovingly told the story of how they borrowed a Minuet, found in one of Bach's notebooks, that wasn't really Bach after all. He then played the original, with Doriss carving out yet another beautiful melody.

Borrowings, re-workings, improvisations, covers and orchestrations – all of it was part of the story.

The next Cape Symphony concert will be a joint presentation with the Cotuit Center for the Arts, featuring Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5 and a staging of the Tom Stoppard/André Previn drama "Every Good Boy Deserves Favour," May 6 and 7 at the Barnstable Performing Arts Center. Tickets and information: www.capesymphony.org or 508-362-1111.

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