

Music Notes

From the desk of

Francine Maté, Organist/Choirmaster

It gives me great pleasure to write about our just-concluded Bach Festival at Grace Church. We offered six concerts this year, and as in the past, each concert was unique.

2 recitals were totally organ. Since the A. David Moore organ at Grace Church is one of the finest in Washington, D.C., we like to feature it. Each of the two organ recitals was unique as well.

The first all organ recital was on Wednesday, July 8 at 7:30 p.m. The internationally acclaimed German organist, Roland Maria Stangier, from Essen, Germany, came to Washington, D.C. to play on the Grace Church Bach Festival and at the Basilica of the National Shrine in N.E., Washington. Professor Stangier's concert comprised organ toccatas of JS Bach, and Professor Stangier's own improvisations.

On Monday, July 13 at 7:30 p.m., our own Larry Molinaro, founder of the Grace Church Bach Festival, played an extremely interesting organ recital. Since this year is a Felix Mendelssohn anniversary year, Larry played a recreation of the same organ recital that Felix Mendelssohn performed at Bach's church in Leipzig. This was a very exciting and interesting program for us.

The concert at which I played was the opening program on Sunday, July 5 at 3 p.m. Since it took place on the 4th of July weekend, this was the "Bach Lite" concert. One of the main works on the program was Bach's Coffee Cantata. This cantata is the only cantata by Bach that is really a miniature operetta. We performed it several years ago, but it is simply a delightful cantata with gorgeous music. Google "Bach's Coffee Cantata" and you will get some wonderful uTube performances to compare with the Grace concert!

Our partner church, St. Mary's of Foggy Bottom, hosted our Monday, July 6 concert at 7:30 p.m. The Teiber Trio performed a transcription of Bach's Goldberg Variations for violin, viola and cello. This concert revealed emotion and color in the Variations that many had not heard before!

On Friday, July 10 at 8 p.m. the chamber group con brio! performed a chamber concert of Bach's works. Con brio! is a marvelous Washington area chamber group, and in my recollection, they have performed in 15 of the 16 Grace Church Bach Festivals. And, our own Larry Molinaro plays in this group too!

On Sunday, July 12 at 3 p.m. another chamber group presented Bach's Cantata No. 49. Reggie Allen, who has sung at Grace many times, was one of the soloists for this concert. My long time friend and colleague, Larry Hammerling, played in the chamber group, and performed some solo organ pieces as well on our marvelous organ.

We're delighted many of you attended and enjoyed our Bach Festival at Grace Church!

Soli Deo Gloria!

Francine



Excerpts from reviews of Bach Fest 2009 7

♦ *From Joan Reinathaler's review of the July 5 concert, in washingtonpost.com:*

“A tale of generational disconnect, (Bach's Coffee Cantata) features Herr Schlendrian (Mr. Stick-in-the-Mud), sung by baritone Brian Ming Chu, trying to convince his teenage daughter (soprano Soo Young Kim Chrisfield) to give up drinking coffee. After she brushes aside all his threats, in exasperation he tells her there will be no husband for her until she comes around. She does, but (in an aside) promises to only marry someone who will allow her her coffee. It's a piece full of cheerful Bachisms and...both singers acted their roles delightfully...

“The first half of the program included a set of seven short Choral Preludes played with intelligent restraint by Francine Maté on the church's wonderful baroque organ...”

♦ *From Cecilia Porter's review of the July 6 concert, in washingtonpost.com*

“J.S. Bach's music demands that musicians reach for the stars. The Teiber Trio did just that Monday with the composer's Herculean but strangely compelling Goldberg Variations, BWV. 988, at St. Mary's Church in Foggy Bottom. While Bach originally set the piece for a two-keyboard harpsichord, the Teiber offered Dmitry Sitkovetsky's arrangement for a string threesome.

“A set of thirty variations squeezed out of a seemingly simple folk-like theme in countless ways, this music is so abstract and concentrated in its conception as to be harrowing for performers and listeners alike. But despite the technical hurdles, violinist Regino Madrid, violist Derek Smith and cellist Charlie Powers conveyed the piece's exhilarating beauty, giving it the percussive punch and driving pulse that one expects from a harpsichord. The performance enthralled the audience, though it was first written to lull a Russian count, afflicted by insomnia, to sleep.

“In a rather personal account of the variations, the Teiber players also revealed sides of the music possible with their particular set of strings: luminous contrasts in color, crystalline textures, a wide swath in sonorities...” from high to low and resonant depth. And the group's tempos and gradations in dynamics were imaginative, ranging from subdued adagio laments in minor keys to lightning-quick prestissimos....”

♦ *From Joe Banno's review of the July 13 concert, in Washingtonpost.com:*

The Grace Church Bach Festival concluded Monday night with an unusually thorough piece of musicological reconstruction. Lawrence Molinaro -- former organist and choir director at this Georgetown church, and founder of its 16-year-old Bach Festival -- re-created the organ recital Felix Mendelssohn gave on August 6, 1840, at Bach's own St. Thomas Church in Leipzig. But beyond just performing the works, Molinaro explained (in a pre-recital talk) that he would endeavor to re-create Mendelssohn's actual style of playing, emphasizing fleet tempos, fluid phrasing and more varied and colorful registration than is...used today.

The result was a sprightly, engagingly played mix of Bach chestnuts... and less frequently encountered works Molinaro's frequent shifts in registration -- aided by the piquant color of the church's wonderful A. David Moore instrument -- clarified the composer's musical argument in the passacaglia's buzzing hive of variations, and the forward motion of his playing pointed up the magisterial architecture in all of those fugal movements.

One element from 1840 impossible to re-create was the improvised playing with which Mendelssohn opened and closed his program. But Molinaro offered cannily chosen selections from Mendelssohn's own organ music to provide sweepingly dramatic bookends for the Bach. In the Con Moto Maestoso movement from Mendelssohn's Sonata in A, Op. 65, No. 3, the organist's propulsive, immaculately articulated playing revved the evening to a thrilling conclusion.