

Concert Review of September 20, 2008

By John Paul Keeler For the Hudson-Catskill Newspapers

KENNETH COOPER BRINGS BERKSHIRE BACH TO CHATHAM

The renowned harpsichordist Kenneth Cooper brought the Berkshire Bach Ensemble to Chatham for the final event of the PS/21 Summer Season Saturday evening. The stunning performance was the finest this writer has heard in Columbia County of Baroque Music in nearly three decades. The program was dedicated to the memory of Paul Grunberg.

All ten musicians of the ensemble are world class virtuosi on their instruments. It was an evening of miraculous playing. Maestro Cooper leading from the Harpsichord could indeed have been Bach or Handel so definitive was his leading. He drew from his musicians gorgeous sound and perfect rhythmic exactitude underpinning it all with his wonderful playing at the harpsichord and creating a rare unity of ensemble.

The program began with Handel's "Concerto Grosso in B Minor Op 6 number 12". The first few measures of the opening Largo became an immediate portent of an exciting evening of music. One has not heard this great work performed live with such élan and rich breadth of orchestral color. There was electricity and excitement from piano to forte and heartbreak in the superb Aria (Larghetto e piano). With such a performance Mozart's remark comes to mind when he said, "When Handel chooses to, he strikes like lightning."

Next came the wonderful arrangement of the Bach "Trio Sonata number 4 in E minor" (BWV 528). This vibrant work with surprising dark clouds among its felicities was a superb musical experience with the haunting silver sheen of Marsha Heller's oboe d'amore, the rich sonority of Stephen Walt's bassoon, the vibrant texture of Peter Weitzner's bass, and the intensity of Cooper's Harpsichord making this Bach work a rich discovery.

The first half ended with Bach's "Violin Concerto number 2 in E" (BWV 1042) played with spectacular virtuosity and haunting poetry by violinist Eugene Drucker. His performance brought to mind past performances of this great Bach work by both Menuhin and Ricci and indeed Drucker fits well into their illustrious company. One is familiar with his beautiful playing as a founding member of the Emerson Quartet but this is the first time hearing him in a concerto and unlike many other quartet violinists who are often stiff and awkward in the concerti world, Drucker is indeed even more enjoyable if possible as soloist in a concerto.

After intermission Kenneth Cooper sailed into Bach's "Harpsichord Concerto number 5 in F Minor" (BWV 1056) and brought sweeping brilliance to the work and made time stop in the beauty of the Largo before sailing ahead in the Presto that concludes the work.

The program ended with Bach's "Double Concerto in C Minor for Violin and Oboe" (BWV 1060). This concerto like the Handel which opened the program was another lightning stroke, this time by Bach. Marsha Heller's oboe sound was even more brilliant this time around and violinist Eiko Tanaka matched her with exciting violin filigree. Cooper played with such excitement that one feared he might land hands down on the harpsichord itself.

Berkshire Bach is so marvelous with Baroque Music that they must come again to Columbia County and a Baroque Festival at PS/21 next summer would be the perfect answer. Meanwhile on October 11th at 8 PM just over the Columbia border at the First Congregational Church at Great Barrington a program of Cooper's arrangements of Bach's Six Great Trio Sonatas will be performed. And on December 13th also at the Church will be a performance of Bach's glorious "Christmas Oratorio" with the Berkshire Bach Singers.