

Berkshire Bach Society's New Year's Brandenburgs 2010 with Kenneth Cooper at the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall

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Kenneth Cooper, President, and Music Director of the Berkshire Bach Society

Bach at New Year's 2009-2010: The Six Brandenburg Concerti

Berkshire Bach Ensemble, directed from the harpsichord by Kenneth Cooper

Brandenburg Concerto No. 1 in F (BWV 1046)

Patrick Wood, violin solo; Judy Kang, Ronald Gorevic, Eiko Tanaka, *violins*; Liuh-Wen Ting, Irena Momchilova, *violas*; Alistair MacRae, *cello*; Peter Weitzner, *bass*; Marsha Heller, Alexandra Knoll, Meg Owens, *oboes*; Stephen Walt, *bassoon*; Allan Dean, Neil Mueller, *horns*; Ben Harms, *timpani*; Kenneth Cooper, *harpsichord*

Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 in F (BWV 1047)

Eiko Tanaka, *violin solo*; Judith Mendenhall, *flute*; Meg Owens, *oboe*; Gerald Serfass, *trumpet*; Judy Kang, Ronald Gorevic, Patrick Wood, *violins*; Liuh-Wen Ting, Irena Momchilova, *violas*; Lucy Bardo, *cello*; Peter Weitzner, *bass*; Kenneth Cooper, *harpsichord*

Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G (BWV 1048)

Judy Kang, Eiko Tanaka, Patrick Wood, *violins*; Irena Momchilova, Liuh-Wen Ting, Ronald Gorevic, *violas*; Alistair MacRae, Lucy Bardo, *cellos*; Peter Weitzner, *bass*; Marsha Heller, Alexandra Knoll, *oboes*; Meg Owens, *english horn*; Stephen Walt, *bassoon*; Allan Dean, Neil Mueller, *horns*; Kenneth Cooper, *harpsichord*

Brandenburg Concerto No. 4 in G (BWV 1049)

Judy Kang, *violin solo*; Judith Mendenhall, Alison Hale, *flutes*; Eiko Tanaka, Patrick Wood, *violins*; Liuh-Wen Ting, *viola*; Lucy Bardo, *cello*; Peter Weitzner, *bass*; Kenneth Cooper, *harpsichord*

Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 in D (BWV 1050)

Alison Hale, *flute*; Patrick Wood, *violin*; Kenneth Cooper, *harpsichord*; Eiko Tanaka, *violin*; Irena Momchilova, *viola*; Alistair MacRae, *cello*; Peter Weitzner, *bass*

Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 in B-flat (BWV 1051)

Liuh-Wen Ting, Ronald Gorevic, *violas*; Lucy Bardo, Ben Harms, *gambas*; Alistair MacRae, *cello*; Peter Weitzner, *bass*; Kenneth Cooper, *harpsichord*

I always look forward to the Berkshire Bach Society's New Year's Bach concerts, this year their classic program of the Brandenburg Concertos straight through. I was especially pleased that they scheduled a third concert at the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall, allowing us to hear them in their full glory, that is, in a fully satisfactory

acoustic, more than that, in fact, since the Music Hall offers a unique bloom all its own. It seemed a bit much at first, as the musicians pulled themselves together after Kenneth Cooper's perfectly clear initial beat in the first concerto. Everyone was quite happily together after a couple of bars, and the rest was a marvellous blend of atmosphere and clarity. In fact it was really quite a revelation to hear some passages—especially the entire sixth concerto—in this unique environment.

The New Year's concerts are the Berkshire Bach Society's keynote event, one which invigorates one's sense of community as much as one's relation to these exuberant classics—a household fixture, we should remember, for less than eighty years. Seeing the musicians assemble in the Music Hall, which resembles an old town square, I couldn't help thinking of them as the town musicians, who were so much a part of the groups Bach himself brought together for a variety of occasions. On this day, the usual compliment suggested by Bach's indications and the best efforts of organologists was supplemented by extra hands. It seems there was no funeral that day, so the tympanist turned out, bringing along some extra percussion (tambourine and cymbals) to make the first Brandenburg even more festive than usual. The hunt club must have cancelled its annual dinner, because their horn players, playing their diminutive instruments in F, were there as well. On the other hand, the violin soloist should probably have stayed at the tavern whence he obviously came, because, in his inebriated state, he improvised outrageously in the ritornelli of the final movement, egging his colleagues on to similar mischief.

In all seriousness, however, I'm sure the solo violinist was sober enough for the job. In fact Patrick Wood's contributions throughout the afternoon made a most favorable impression through their straightforward focus and incisive phrasing. His (or Mr. Cooper's) ornamentation in the long final dance movement of the first concerto, which almost verged on full variations, did in fact suggest the down-to-earth elaborations of a town musician—nothing like the discreet ornamentation introduced on more "serious" occasions, which attempts to blend in with the textual style and create the impression that the "improvisations" were written by the composer himself. The additions to the other parts also seemed to belong more to the town than the, but they did add their own rumbustious spirits to the occasion.

The second concerto benefitted from a splendid quartet of soloists, Eiko Tanaka, violin, Judith Mendenhall, flute, Meg Owens, oboe, and Gerald Serfass, trumpet, who played on a high level individually and interacted in a lively and interesting manner, apart from Kenneth Cooper's energetic direction.

Mr. Cooper's instrumental inventiveness came into play once again in the third concerto, traditionally scored for strings alone. On this occasion, he called in two oboes, English horn, bassoon, and the two hunting horns from the first concerto. Regulars at these concerts won't be surprised at this colorful expansion of the textual scoring, which is perfectly plausible in the historical circumstances. Only purists or those who were looking forward to the sound of pure strings as an aural palate-cleanser could take exception. Beyond this, Mr. Cooper exploited his re-instrumentation further in the last movement by placing the woodwinds in one of the boxes on the audience's right. Hence, as if in the open air, the winds and the main orchestra could engage in a dialogue over the heads of part of the audience. Less fun was the slow movement interpolated from the Violin Sonata in G, BWV 1021, following a tradition going back at least as far as Thurston Dart in the 1950s. Somehow this movement doesn't quite leave us where we intuitively think we ought to be for the finale, and, with the additional wind instruments, it seemed a bit ponderous and over-long, especially since the musicians seemed to be playing it with some caution, although with elegance. I admired the playing, but when my companion observed that she found it a trifle boring, I couldn't entirely disagree. It would have been much more compelling if left to the violin and harpsichord, as written.

After the break, the interventions ceased, and there was nothing but musical joy of the most direct, straightforward sort. Judy Kang's violin solo and the double flutes of Judith Mendenhall and Alison Hale, with their unpretentious, but elegant and expressive phrasing, were absolutely wonderful in the Fourth, one of the high points of the afternoon. Ms. Hale's sensitive, restrained playing proved also to be an especially delightful contribution to the fifth concerto, as was her partner, Patrick Wood, on violin. Kenneth Cooper played the great keyboard cadenza with all his customary flair and energy, culminating in a surprisingly cacophonous outburst at

the end, which aroused good-humored laughter, when it might have raised a few hackles. In these concerts reverence for Bach remains entirely in the heart, which the intellect remains at the disposal of the interpreters. Hence, if one didn't arrive at the hall in a generous and open-minded spirit, one should have arrived at it halfway through the first concerto. Above I was not so much expressing reservations about the BBS arrangements (except in the Third Brandenburg) as putting them in context. At the very least they open our ears and delight us.

The sixth Brandenburg was also one of the wonders of the afternoon. The musicianship was truly outstanding, and the Music Hall acoustics allowed inner details to be heard in fine detail. The string attacks, the individual sound of the instruments, and their unusual timbre as an ensemble were all vivid and clear. This was one of the most complete experiences of the Sixth ever, in my recollection. The acoustics and the superb musicianship of the players was not the only reason for this. Violist Ron Gorevic tells me that he was interested in experimenting with the two violists standing opposite one another to bring out the antiphonal exchange between them. I can only say that this experiment was a great success, and I hope to hear the effect again, the next time the BBS celebrates New Year's with the Brandenburgs.

With this, one more of Kenneth Cooper's New Year's Bach programs closed to the customary warm, long applause. I should add that the Rensselaer County audience seemed larger and keener than any I saw at the Colonial.