

# **Berkshire Bach Society: An evening of pearls and changing seasons**

**By Andrew L. Pincus, Special to the Berkshire Eagle  
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GREAT BARRINGTON -- Real pearls or imitation?

The Berkshire Bach Society posed the tease Saturday night in what it described as the U.S. premiere of Bach's wedding cantata "Die Pleisse und Neisse," BWV 216. Which pearls were by Bach, and which were a reconstruction by Kenneth Cooper, the society's music director?

Cooper covered his tracks well. The 25-minute work could have been mistaken for what Bach wrote in the original if most of it hadn't been lost.

The performance, conducted by Cooper from the harpsichord, climaxed one in a series of Bach society 20th-anniversary concerts. Earlier in the program in the First Congregational Church, Cooper and the Berkshire Bach Ensemble, performing with irresistible brio, marked the changing seasons with pieces by Handel, Vivaldi and Corelli.

Bach's 1728 cantata celebrates the nuptials of a widower merchant from Leipzig to a damsel from the German town of Zittau. The singers, however, are each city's river. The Neisse, from Zittau, complains (mildly) about the loss of her treasure to a Leipziger. The Pleisse, from Leipzig, pleads the bridegroom's case to Zittau.

Cooper explained that two vocal parts from the lost cantata recently surfaced in Tokyo (no, neither Leipzig nor Zittau). From them, he reconstructed accompaniments for five movements, lifting two movements from other Bach cantatas to fill out the story. Slyly, he declined to identify which of the seven movements were all-Bach.

Echoes of the "Brandenburg" concertos and the "Christmas" Oratorio pop out of the orchestrations. Indeed, the opening duet seems to begin with a blast from the "Brandenburgs."

The completed work hardly rises to the level of top-drawer Bach, but it's always fun to be there when the churchman casts off his vestments and enjoys the more homely virtues. And the performance was enhanced by the lithe, lively singing of soprano Vania Chan as Neisse and mezzo-soprano Kate Maroney as Pleisse.

The two young newcomers to the Bach series handled the sometimes florid parts like veterans, made goo-goo eyes at each other and wound up in a courtly dance amid Pleisse's wish that "their cradles be adorned by children." The small instrumental ensemble added a colorful voice to the blessings.

"The Many Faces of Bach" is the theme of the society's anniversary season. In several ways, one of those faces bore a striking resemblance to Kenneth Cooper.

Before getting to the springtime nuptials, Cooper's program opened with an early version of Handel's "Water Music" (summer), Vivaldi's violin concerto "The Hunt" (fall) and Corelli's "Christmas" Concerto (guess). This kind of programming is vintage Cooper, as are bright, springy performances on modern instruments.

The director outdid himself, however, for the seasonal Corelli favorite. He adorned it with bits of Italian folk music and readings of the Nativity story from Luke to introduce the sections ("to clarify the images," the program explained).

Standing behind the organ, Benjamin Luxon could have passed as a High Church preacher as he narrated with an English accent and oratorical grandeur. His occasional rhetorical flourishes were met with similar accents from the orchestra. Some lively ornamentation also spiced the story.

As soloists in the Handel suite, trumpeter Allan Dean and timpanist Ben Harms evoked pomp on the Thames. Violinist Marjorie Bagley brought a bright tone and panache to the Vivaldi concerto, in which hunters' horn calls emerged on twin oboes.

The program also was the society's annual coffeehouse presentation, recalling Bach's concerts with his collegium in Zimmermann's Coffeehouse in Leipzig. At intermission, Luxon appeared as Herr Zimmermann, now speaking with a booming German accent as his patrons dined on complimentary refreshments provided by the Castle Street Café.