

Bach at New Years

By Andrew L. Pincus for the Berkshire Eagle
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GREAT BARRINGTON - In 20 years of concert-giving, the Berkshire Bach Society has featured star soloists from time to time, but probably never an array of star power like the one that ushered in 2011.

Three brand-name violinists - Joseph Silverstein, Ani Kavafian and Eugene Drucker - and the outstanding flutist Carol Wincenc joined 17 members of the Berkshire Bach Ensemble in the society's annual New Year's Eve bash. As is customary, the program also featured harpsichordist-conductor Kenneth Cooper's fun and games with Bach: interpolations, ornamentations, drum rolls, trumpet flourishes and assorted plunges, squiggles and teases.

The odd thing about this Bach-as-bacchanal business was the overall sobriety of the champagne evening. From an acoustically challenged seat under the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center's balcony, the solo displays caught fire but the ensemble work tended to stay on the safe side of the street. (The effect might have been different elsewhere in the theater.)

The program, given before a sold-out audience in the Mahaiwe (and repeated on New Year's Day in Troy, N.Y.), continued the society's anniversary theme of "The Many Faces of Bach."

The face presented this time was "Bach as Kapellmeister," recalling his years (1717-1723) as director of instrumental music at the court of Cothen. From those years, the program offered three of the master's best-known works: the "Brandenburg" Concertos Nos. 1 and 3 and the Suite No. 2 for flute and strings.

But where in all this, you might ask, do three solo violins fit in?

Their main vehicle was a concerto in D, which a program note described as "a reconstruction of a possible original version of the Concerto in C for three Claviers [keyboards]" [with] some fancy fiddling by all three soloists. ... Different shadings of soloist tone and personality ... provided the drama.

The concerto was preceded by a brief excursion outside Bach, a concerto in D for four violins (without accompaniment) by Telemann. With concertmaster Marjorie Bagley as the added soloist, the lively doings suggested four cats scampering around a room, chasing and skittering away from one another.

Wincenc was spellbinding in the famous flute suite, playing with elegance heightened by just a touch of coolness. The dance movements had delicious lilts. She was accompanied by a reduced complement of strings.

It seemed to take the ensemble two movements of the first "Brandenburg," which opened the program, to warm up to the task. By then, timpani tattoos had already been added to the Bach mix. By the end, Bach was enjoying various other appendages, including bells and a tambourine that turned the finale into a kind of Turkish march. A dazzling solo interpolation, played by Bagley, seemed to come out of left field.

As the closer, the third "Brandenburg" turned everybody into a soloist. To make sure the wind instruments - two oboes, an English horn, a bassoon and two horns - got a chance, the largo from the keyboard Concerto No. 5 was inserted as a slow movement. The keyboard solos were evenly distributed among the winds, all of them excellent.

All four soloists were veterans of previous Bach Society collaborations, Silverstein and Drucker having matched wits and tones two years ago. The elaborate seating configurations also gave the stage manager a

starring role.

On Feb. 13, the society moves on to "Bach as Organist," with an organ and brass concert at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Pittsfield.

A busy guy, that Johann Sebastian.