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Music in Review

By STEPHEN HOLDEN, VIVIEN SCWEITZER and JOE HENRY

NEW YORK COLLEGIUM

Miller Theater

The concert of the New York Collegium at the Miller Theater on Thursday evening might not have been exactly a matter of life and death for the organization. But it did loom extraordinarily large as what may be the financially troubled collegium's lone major presentation in a season when it is mostly on hiatus.

And major it was, with performances of two big secular cantatas by Bach separated by his Orchestral Suite No. 2. The cantatas — “Der Zufriedengestellte Aeolus” (“Aeolus Satisfied,” BWV 205) and “Vereinigte Zwietracht der Wechselnden Saiten” (“United Discord of Alternating Strings,” BWV 207) — were written to celebrate the installations of law professors at Leipzig University in 1725 and 1726. The conceit of the program, “Bach’s Music Theater,” was that these were as close as Bach got to writing operas, though that is not very close, and no attempt was made to stage the works in any but a concert setting.

The performances, conducted by Andrew Parrott, the collegium’s music director, were generally compelling, with especially fine work from Thomas Meglioranza, a baritone, who gave a rollicking account of the blowhard Aeolus’s delightful laughing aria. Emily Van Evera, a soprano, and Kirsten Sollek, a mezzo-soprano, also had winning moments. If the orchestra suffered from rustiness because of its extended layoff, it showed only in the uneven work of the trumpeters.

The concert ended the Clarion-Collegium week, “Exploring the Music and Performance Practice of J. S. Bach,” a collaboration with the Clarion Music Society. It also continued the Miller Theater’s series Bach and the Baroque, which began late last month with a concert by another period band, Les Boréades de Montréal.

It might not have been ideal planning for the collegium and Les Boréades to have played the same Bach suite. On the other hand, it afforded an opportunity to see how the collegium would stack up against a similar group with international ambitions. With Sandra Miller as a sparkling flute soloist, the home team won handily — reason enough to hope that it will survive and thrive anew.

In any case, the collegium will continue next season, Jean-Hugues Monier, the president of the board, said in a brief interview at intermission. But it has not yet decided whether to present a full season, work with a variety of halls, collaborate with other groups or concentrate on recording. Any of the above will be welcome. JAMES R. OESTREICH

The next concert in the Miller Theater’s Bach and the Baroque series features the Gotham City Orchestra, on

March 1; (212) 854-7799, millertheater.com.

JOE HENRY

Allen Room

Baseball nostalgia has a special niche in popular music. Merely dropping the name of a beloved old-time slugger is enough to conjure a trampled, muddy field of dreams where nobility and innocence once reigned.

For the associations it evokes, [Paul Simon](#)'s wistful cry "Where have you gone, [Joe DiMaggio](#)?" is an entire poem in itself. And on Thursday evening, at the Allen Room, the name [Willie Mays](#), sung by Joe Henry, poignantly conjured the same golden era when America was younger and prouder.

At his concert, part of [Lincoln Center](#)'s American Songbook series, Mr. Henry was accompanied by David Piltch on bass and Jay Bellerose on drums. His special guests, the pianist Brad Mehldau and the clarinetist Don Byron, injected strong jazz elements into Mr. Henry's straightforward but malleable and poetically ambitious songwriting.

Willie Mays appeared in "Our Song," a forcefully sorrowful reflection on America's decline and the most eloquent number on Mr. Henry's recent (and 10th) album, "Civilians" (Anti). In this gloomy X-ray vision of a depressed country, with hints of a silver lining, the narrator imagines glimpsing Mays — the "Say Hey Kid" — and his wife shopping at a Home Depot in Scottsdale, Ariz. Eavesdropping, he overhears this great center fielder lamenting the country's slide into a "frightful and angry land."

Mr. Henry's embattled growl, with its Southern soul inflections, is a potent instrument that puts a personal stamp on lyrics that follow the elliptical style of [Bob Dylan](#) and [Elvis Costello](#). His ominous urban and suburban tableaux also have more than a little [Tom Waits](#) in them, especially in songs like "Sold," in which Mr. Mehldau's mildly dissonant piano and Mr. Byron's clarinet created a woozy carnival atmosphere.

Midway in the show Mr. Henry declared that he was not a political songwriter. That may be true to the extent that he doesn't overtly proselytize and blame individuals for the collective malaise he describes. But as he performed selections from "Civilians," the overwhelming impression was of a brooding social observer fighting despair. The warring forces in his songs, he explained, are romance and chaos.

In one number after another, the personal became political, and vice versa. The strife in "Civil War" (also from "Civilians") is domestic as well as social. In fact, the two are inextricable. The scary part is that each combatant is capable of annihilating the other.

A crucial word that threaded through several songs is "mercy." Without it, there is no end to conflict. Surrender, whether on the battlefield or in the domestic arena, is incredibly risky, but the willingness to live without defenses is a necessary precondition for peace. STEPHEN HOLDEN

NATIONAL SYMPHONY

Orchestra

[Carnegie Hall](#)

Nineteenth-century composers of symphonic tone poems relied on instrumental effects to convey a narrative or scene. Contemporary composers can integrate high-definition recordings of sounds they want to evoke, as Mason Bates does in his cleverly constructed “Liquid Interface.”

The first movement, “Glaciers Calving,” begins with an ominous recording of glaciers crashing into the Antarctic Ocean, soon followed by dense, haunting swirls from the strings and electronic beats that accelerate to lively drum and bass rhythms.

Mr. Bates’s colorful four-movement tone poem, which uses a vast orchestra and electronics to evoke water in both soothing and menacing forms, received its New York premiere at Carnegie Hall on Thursday with the [National Symphony Orchestra](#) (which commissioned it), conducted by [Leonard Slatkin](#). Mr. Slatkin concludes his 12-year tenure as music director, during which he frequently programmed new works, in June.

In the vivid “Scherzo Liquido,” eerie electronic beats punctuate a pointillist string canvas, aptly evoking the unnerving sound of dripping water. Mr. Bates, who is also a D.J. (working under the name Masonic), has written other works blending classical and electronica. He stood near the percussionists with his laptop and electronic drum pad, while a monitor with flashing green lights helped Mr. Slatkin synchronize the instrumental and electronic elements.

Mr. Bates’s orchestral writing is often quite traditional in this programmatic work, with primarily tonal harmonies (and sometimes not particularly interesting ones). The electronica was the 21st-century visitor to a primarily 19th-century instrumental gathering — modern percussion that was both seamlessly integrated and incongruous. In “On the Wannsee” (inspired by the lake in Berlin) the strings play a gentle, lyrical tune over soft electronic beats. For the listener it was like wandering down a road with a string quartet playing on one side and a D.J. spinning on the other.

Next came the seldom performed Piano Concerto No. 2 by Liszt, a pioneer of the tone poem. The fine French pianist [Jean-Yves Thibaudet](#) ably traversed its varying moods, his hands flashing across the keys with volcanic force and unleashing cascading volleys of notes with crystalline articulation, his feet frantically tap dancing under the keys in energetic agreement. He was suitably poetic in the moments of respite between the many passages of Lisztian bombast. The orchestra is mostly an accompanist here (as in Chopin’s piano concertos), but this partnership sometimes felt haphazard, though David Hardy, the principal cellist, made fine contributions.

The orchestra had a chance to show its mettle in Ravel’s orchestration of Mussorgsky’s vivid “Pictures at an Exhibition.” Mr. Slatkin, who orchestrated one of the “Promenade” sections and changed some dynamic marking to reflect the composer’s intentions better, seemed to enjoy conducting the work, and the orchestra responded acutely, ending the evening as evocatively as it had begun. VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

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