

Aston Magna: Music on the side of truth

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LENOX -- For part of its 40th-anniversary gala, Aston Magna revived one of its greatest hits, Handel's allegorical oratorio "The Triumph of Time and Truth."

The title could also have applied to the concert itself. Having triumphed over financial woes and internal disputes, the early-music festival celebrated on Saturday night with a program that placed it squarely in the realm of time and truth.

The Ozawa Hall concert convened seven singers and 18 instrumentalists -- most of them Aston Magna alumni -- under the leadership of violinist-director Daniel Stepner. Four generous slices of music made up the program, but it was the finale, Bach's "Brandenburg" Concerto No. 1, that most clearly showed how far Aston Magna has traveled along the road to musical truth.

The festival's 1977 performance of the six "Brandenburgs" was a seminal event: as far as anyone knows, the first traversal of the set in the United States on period instruments. If memory can be trusted, the performances were more experiment and adventure than revelation.

A long generation later, all the roughness and bobbles were erased. Smoothness and panache reigned. The two prominent hunting-horn parts alone told the difference.

Where once they had grated against each other, now they bubbled and blended merrily. Bach swung. He lilted. He rejoiced.

That's how far the early-music movement has matured in four decades.

"Time and Truth" was, paradoxically both Handel's first oratorio and his last, thanks to a late-in-life revision. The gist of the story is that Time and Truth (they are personified onstage) endure, while Beauty and Pleasure are fleeting. Though the work is a rarity, one of its arias turns up again as the great lament in Handel's "Rinaldo."

Saturday's reprise of "highlights" recalled Aston Magna's 1998 complete performances, which culminated in a recording and a European tour that included the Roman palace where the work had its premiere.

The patched-together excerpts didn't quite cohere, despite some witty acting by the characters. (Beauty, for example, primped before hand-held mirror.) The singing, however, was excellent -- perhaps most deliciously in Kristen Watson's florid aria as Beauty scorning Time's ravages.

Rounding out the evening were a group of madrigals by Monteverdi -- an Aston Magna perennial -- and an excerpted version of Purcell's opera "Dido and Aeneas."

Many gems sparkled in the gorgeous Monteverdi settings, revealing facets that make his madrigals at once voluptuous and chaste, whether sacred or profane.

If a choice had to be made here, it would be Roberta Anderson's maiden's lament against a chorus of three men who bewail, alas, that "love mixes fire and ice." The "Dido" excerpts, also semi-staged, fell short of full regal or heroic stature in the Dido of Deborah Rentz-Moore and the Aeneas of David Ripley, whose voice sounded worn. Lynn Torgove, however, was a wicked sorceress, and richness of detail in the singing and playing illuminated the tragedy.

The sighing strings that saw Dido to her death told their own story. The instrumental playing under Stepner was superb all night. Period instruments were important, of course, but this was simply fine music-making by fine musicians. Aston Magna has come a long way in its 40 years. In a time of rampant change, may it long remain on the side of truth.