

MUSIC REVIEW

Aston Magna celebrates 40 seasons

By Jeremy Eichler | GLOBE STAFF JUNE 11, 2012



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Aston Magna marked its 40th year with Friday's performance at Brandeis of Bach, Monteverdi, Purcell, and Handel.

WALTHAM — The early music movement in this country was incubated in a small handful of places, and one of them was Aston Magna. Established in 1972 and now the

oldest early music festival in the country, it was founded by harpsichordist Albert Fuller and Lee Elman, taking its name from Elman's Great Barrington estate where the concerts first took place.

In the early years the concerts were only one part of a diverse slate of activities that included Aston Magna Academies, interdisciplinary gatherings that brought together performers and scholars for the kind of focused yet wide-ranging inquiry that brings depth to an emerging field. In the performance domain, as a meeting place for early music pioneers, Fuller's Aston Magna became the first American ensemble to perform Mozart Symphonies on period instruments, and made the first period instrument recording of Bach's complete Brandenburg Concertos.

Violinist Daniel Stepner, a longtime festival participant, has since 1990 presided as its artistic director. His era has seen more touring, recordings, and for the first time a consistent Boston-area presence for the festival as its Berkshires-based summer programs are now brought to Brandeis University's Slosberg Auditorium for one performance apiece.

This weekend the festival kicked off its season and celebrated its 40th anniversary with an early music party of sorts — or two of them — at Brandeis on Friday night, and Tanglewood's Ozawa Hall on Saturday. For the occasion Stepner led a small chamber orchestra and vocalists in an expansive program based on highlights from years past, including Bach's First Brandenburg Concerto and selections from both Purcell's "Dido and Aeneas" and Handel's "The Triumph of Time and Truth." Friday evening's singers were Kristen Watson, Roberta Anderson, Deborah Rentz-Moore, Lynn Torgove, Frank Kelley, Jonas Budris, and David Ripley.

Opening the program was a handsome set of Monteverdi madrigals, with the ear-catching vocal-instrumental blends of "Hor che'l ciel" and the beautifully melancholic tread of "Lamento della ninfa" superbly rendered. In the "Dido" excerpts, standouts included Torgove as a lively Sorceress and Watson and Anderson as colorful and spunky witches. Rentz-Moore's singing in the title role was more uneven but, in the role's famous lament, deeply felt.

Aston Magna has championed Handel’s early oratorio “The Triumph of Time and Truth,” and when its 1999 Centaur recording was issued, Globe critic Richard Dyer hailed it as “the best Handel recording, outside of ‘Messiah,’ yet made in America.” The excerpts presented here, with recitatives in English and arias in Italian, mounted a persuasive case for this rarely spotted yet vibrant work, with Kelley’s commanding performance as Time, and Watson’s grace and agility as Beauty, making the strongest impressions.

The evening’s period instrument orchestra was led by Stepner, fiddle in hand, with relaxed authority and veteran insight. Packed with experts from the Boston scene and beyond, the group sounded particularly virtuosic in the Handel. A large and appreciative crowd filled Slosberg Auditorium for the occasion. Aston Magna’s season continues through July 7.

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