

Aston Magna revives Jefferson's library of music

By Andrew L. Pincus, Special to Berkshires Week, Berkshire Eagle

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GREAT BARRINGTON -- Drafter and signer of the Declaration of Independence, secretary of state, third president -- but also violinist, music collector and much else besides: That was Jefferson, whose love of music will be recalled by Aston Magna Saturday night in a program of "Music from the Library of Thomas Jefferson." The chamber works and songs are from the catalog he made and later donated to the University of Virginia.

Think of this Founding Father this way: The 1995 movie "Jefferson in Paris" shows him playing the violin and romantically involved with a painter while he was ambassador to France. The film embroiders history, but the violin and the woman were real.

In fact, Aston Magna director Daniel Stepner points out, former Aston Magna violinist Anthony Martin coached Nick Nolte, the Jefferson, in how to play the violin for the film. Nolte performs "La Folia" by Corelli, Jefferson's favorite composer.

Jefferson "was very interested in baroque music," Stepner said in a phone interview. There was no J.S. Bach in the extensive collection, Stepner said, because little of Bach's music was published until the mid-19th century. But, Stepner added, Jefferson did collect Bach's son Johann Christian and "a lot of French opera composers and odd pieces like the [Johann] Schobert sonata we're doing in the program."

The concert, which closes the music series' season, features soprano Sharon Baker, harpsichordist Michael Sponseller and Stepner on baroque violin. It begins at 6 p.m. at Bard College at Simon's Rock.

A few composers will be familiar, Purcell and Mozart among them. Others include Francis Hopkinson, another signer of the Declaration, and Maria Cosway, the married woman to whom Jefferson, then a widower, became attached in Paris.

Cosway, primarily an artist, will be represented by two of a set of seven songs that she sent to Jefferson after she and her husband returned to England.

"It's not clear how close they were," Stepner said. "She was an Italian woman and she wrote some songs for him, and we're doing those songs. And Jefferson had a correspondence with her, which has survived, so we'll read from that correspondence."

The letters, which date from Jefferson's return to America and continue until his death 40 years later, don't show the couple as lovers, Stepner said, but "clearly they were devoted friends."

Jefferson, also noted as an architect and naturalist, lived from 1743 to 1826. He served as ambassador from 1784 to 1789, right up to the start of the French Revolution, and as president from 1801 to 1809. As a violinist, he was already playing for Governor Francis Fauquier when he entered the College of William and Mary. He practiced three hours a day and called music "this favorite passion of my soul." His violin has never been found.

The whole family was musical. Jefferson's wife, Martha, played the fortepiano, and his daughter studied harpsichord in Paris with Claude-Benigne Balbastre, one of the more obscure composers on the program. During the Revolution, interned Hessian prisoners of war heard music at Monticello and were impressed with the skills of both husband and wife.

Adding romantic spice to the Paris years, the slave Sally Hemings, with whom some historians believe Jefferson fathered as many as six children, was there with the family during part of their stay.

Stepner assembled the Aston Magna program from a copy, in Jefferson's hand, of his catalog.

"It is a remarkable range of music that he had in his library," Stepner said. "Clearly, he really loved music and was interested in what was going on."

Three arias at the end of the program show that Jefferson knew operas as well as songs and instrumental music. The selections are from Gay's "Beggar's Opera," Mozart's "Don Giovanni" and Weber's "Freischutz."

Other works in the collection include orchestral pieces, exercises and pieces for the glass armonica, a briefly popular set of tuned glasses invented as an instrument by Benjamin Franklin, who preceded Jefferson in Paris.

And if Hopkinson is better known as a patriot than composer, the program notes quote his boast that "I cannot, I believe, be refused the Credit of being the first Native of the United States who has produced a Musical Composition." (The colonies had just then, in 1788, become the United States.) He'll be represented by three songs from a set of seven dedicated to "His Excellency George Washington."

If you go...

What: Music from the Library of Thomas Jefferson

When: July 11, 12, 13

Where: July 11 at Slosberg Auditorium, Brandeis University; July 12 at Olin Hall, Bard College Annandale-on-Hudson; July 13 at the Daniel Arts Center, Bard College at Simon's Rock.

Admission: \$20 - \$50

Information: astonmagna.org, (413) 528-3595