



Music

New music, old instruments with Aston Magna

By Zoë Madonna | GLOBE STAFF JUNE 14, 2018

When the Aston Magna Music Festival was founded, playing baroque music on period instruments was still a novelty. In the 46 years that have followed, the horizons of period instrument performance have expanded in all directions. Nowadays, you'll still hear a healthy serving of Bach and his Baroque-era buddies at Aston Magna, but recent festivals have offered music by Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms, and even world premieres.

You read that right: world premieres on period instruments. This week's Aston Magna program features music by Bach, Telemann, Handel, and New York-based composer Alex Burtzos. "The Hourglass Equation" for flute, bassoon, violin, and harpsichord debuts in Waltham, Great Barrington, and Hudson, N.Y.



ALEKSANDER KARJAKA/KARJAKA
STUDIOS

"The Hourglass Equation,"
composed by Alex Burtzos (left), will
debut at the Aston Magna Music
Festival.

ADVERTISING



Period instruments, not period pieces, really rule Aston Magna. “It’s the sound of the instruments which the composers were writing for,” music director Daniel Stepner said by phone, explaining the linchpin of the festival.

That means if a composer wrote a piece for classical clarinet, as Mozart did, Aston Magna will use a classical clarinet. If a composer wrote with gut strings in mind, the piece will be played on gut strings.

Burtzos, 32, was introduced to period instruments when he heard the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment’s recording of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 3. “I was astonished,” he said by phone. “The way you hear it played on the instruments for which it was written, you understand the kind of raw rock ’n’ roll power that’s in there, that Beethoven was taking those performers to the edge of their abilities. That rawness, that verve, of people on the edge of what they can do, informs the music.”

In “The Hourglass Equation,” commissioned by Randolph and Cynthia Nelson, he intentionally explores those same edges. “A lot of it has to do with range,” he said. The bassoon is stretched to its limits, playing notes at a very quiet volume that are impossible to tune. “The result is going to be this very choked sound that wavers in intonation, and I’m counting on that. That’s part of the composition.”

“The Hourglass Equation” is Burtzos’s second new piece for Aston Magna, and the third world premiere that the festival has sponsored. It’s based on a poem that the composer wrote a few years ago. Burtzos, who also writes fiction and makes visual art, doesn’t see clear-cut boundaries between his disciplines. “I believe the creative impulse comes from one place, and we as creators just channel it in the most appropriate direction.”

“The Hourglass Equation” utilizes baroque instruments, but its spirit stems from the modern music in which Burtzos is immersed. In addition to being the director of New York-based composers’ collective ICEBERG New Music and the conductor of hip-hop orchestra ShoutHouse, Burtzos formerly played drums and keyboard in pop rock, metal, and rockabilly bands. “What all those bands had in common is that they played loudly and more or less badly, but they had a certain joie de vivre,” said Burtzos. “I don’t think that aspect of my musical language is something I can get rid of.”

Burtzos met Aston Magna festival founder Lee Elman by chance a few years ago at Lincoln Center, when Burtzos was turning pages for pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard. “[Elman] came up to me and said ‘Are you a pianist?’ and I said ‘No, I’m a composer,’” Burtzos said. “And he said ‘Well! I sometimes work with composers!’” The two met later, and the commission of Burtzos’s propulsive 2016 “Sonata/Sonare” followed.

“His music seems to work with old Baroque music. It had good rhythm to it, it was loud enough. . . . It didn’t clash with that kind of music. It was a perfect thing to pair a Baroque piece with a modern piece, and that’s what I wanted. I wanted to jazz up our music festival,” said Elman by phone.

“I think [Burtzos’s] music is colorful and rhythmic, and contemporary in quality but not atonal, and it’s also exploring the colors of our instruments in a creative way,”

said Stepner.

Writing for period instruments did have challenges, said Burtzos. “I don’t know how many times I wrote dynamics for a harpsichord and then had to erase them while cursing. But challenges are really opportunities, right? If you want dynamic contrast on a harpsichord, you have to thicken the texture, and that pushes you in directions that you may not have gone if you were writing for piano. . . . You’re forced to look for solutions.”

So “The Hourglass Equation” will be performed like most other pieces at Aston Magna: on the instruments that the composer wrote for. “We’re at an age right now where there is no one aesthetic anymore, and I truly think the future is synthetic creation,” said Burtzos. “The compositions that will speak of this time are the ones that manage to seamlessly integrate different traditions.”

ASTON MAGNA MUSIC FESTIVAL

At Slosberg Music Center, Brandeis University, Waltham. Thursday, 7 p.m. Repeats Friday in Hudson, N.Y. and Saturday in Great Barrington.

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