

Baroque lesser-knowns come to the fore

Bud Roach's Hammer Baroque series has a blockbuster weekend coming up.

By Leonard Turnevicius

Contributing Columnist

Leonard Turnevicius writes about classical music for The Hamilton Spectator.

Jan. 23, 2025

The Hamilton Spectator

Bach. Handel. Vivaldi.

For most concertgoers, those names constitute the “big three” of music’s baroque era, which roughly encompasses the years 1600 to 1750.

To that lofty, upper echelon we can also add, in no hierarchical order, Monteverdi, Purcell, Rameau, Corelli and Schütz.

However, for more than 50 years now, the recovery of music by composers who hadn’t been heard of in centuries has been one of the upshots of the period instrument movement and the industry supporting early music.

With the proliferation of original instrument ensembles, particularly in the 1970s including Toronto’s Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra (TBO) in 1979, many of these lesser-known composers now have the posthumous opportunity of becoming better-known and more widely appreciated.

Naturally, TBO’s repertoire includes historically-informed performances of beloved classics such as Handel’s “Messiah” with the Tafelmusik Chamber Choir and Vivaldi’s “The Four Seasons,” but also works by composers who may not be household names such as Graun, Marais, Lully, and yes, Telemann whose “Tafelmusik” or “Musique de table,” a three-volume collection of banquet/entertainment music, was co-opted as the chamber orchestra’s name.

Bud Roach’s Hammer Baroque series begins its blockbuster weekend in the Church of St. John the Evangelist, 320 Charlton Ave. W., with the Eybler Quartet on Saturday, Jan. 25 at 3 p.m. followed on Sunday, Jan. 26 at 3 p.m. by “In stile moderno.” This survey of 17th-century instrumental music from Italy performed by six TBO members; violinists Johanna Novom and Christopher Verrette, Keiran Campbell on violoncello, Dominic Teresi on dulcian, a Renaissance-era forerunner of the bassoon, Jonathan Stuchbery on theorbo and guitar, and harpsichordist Charlotte Nediger.

Sunday's bill includes works by such lesser-known composers as Dario Castello, Isabella Leonarda, Giovanni Legrenzi, Antonio Bertali, Giovanni Paolo Cima, Tarquinio Merula and Johann Rosenmüller. At first blush, the latter appears to be a foreign interloper among the Italians. However, Rosenmüller worked in Venice after having been arrested on charges of sexually assaulting choirboys and escaping from prison in Germany.

In the "stile moderno (modern style)," composers began to write idiomatically and virtuosically for the violin and the keyboard instruments, use wind instruments for their specific colour, and sprinkle dynamic indications in their scores. Their sound ideal was a florid treble line above a solid bass line, a "basso continuo" played on one or more instruments such as the organ, harpsichord or lute often reinforced by a violoncello or bassoon. Composers would notate small figures or signs by the bass notes to indicate the harmony which the continuo players would need to fill in via improvisation.

"Improvisation is a part of every work on the program," explained Teresi. "In the case of the basso continuo players — theorbo and harpsichord — almost everything they are playing is improvised. They read from a melodic bass line that contains a shorthand notation for the harmony of the piece which is completely improvised, very much like reading from a lead sheet in jazz."

Suggested donation is \$20.

On Saturday, Feb. 8 at 3 p.m. in St. John the Evangelist Church, address above, Hammer Baroque presents artistic director Roach's Capella Intima vocal ensemble and the Gallery Players in "Vice & Virtue."

The featured work is a revival from 2013 of their largest project, the 45-minute chamber oratorio "Giuseppe," attributed to Luigi Rossi, a 17th-century composer from Naples.

"I found this work at the U of Toronto's Music Library as part of a multi-volume set of early Italian oratorios, and was immediately drawn to the 'Anonymous' collection because it represents one of those goals of Capella Intima," said Roach. "I've always sought out lesser-known or even completely unknown music to present to our audiences. Music by 'Anonymous' is about as obscure as we can get."

Using Sibelius' music notation software, Roach painstakingly transcribed the facsimile of the manuscript note by note into a performance score, correcting its ancient errors as he went. For help in deciphering the Italian, he turned to McMaster prof Gabriele Erasmì, who, prior to his passing in 2023, was a walking encyclopedia of Italian language and culture.

“In preparations for the remounting of this work, I have been revisiting audio recordings I made of Gabriele’s demonstrations of Italian diction, and his explanations of differences between regional dialects, and Latin influences in the biblical language of the oratorio,” said Roach. “Our performances of this work are dedicated to his memory, and produced with the financial assistance of the Hamilton chapter of the Dante Alighieri Society.”

The oratorio centres on Jacob’s son, Joseph, in the biblical book of Genesis, though it skips the “coat of many colours” passage.

“This piece begins with Joseph’s brothers arriving in Egypt during the famine that Joseph predicted years before in a dream, after he had been sold into slavery,” recounted Roach. “Recognizing his long-lost siblings, and having risen very high up in the political structure of Egypt, the piece plays out like a trial, where Joseph is at times angry and cunning, but ultimately forgiving of his brothers’ jealous cruelty when they were younger.”

Baritone David Roth sings the role of Giuseppe, mezzo Laura Pudwell is the narrator, sopranos Sheila Dietrich, Ellen Torrie and tenor Bud Roach are Joseph’s brothers. The GP consist of violinists Patricia Ahern, Hamilton’s Michelle Odorico, cellist Margaret Gay, organist Jonathan Oldengarm, plus lutenists Lucas Harris and Jonathan Stuchbery.

The concert’s second half will primarily consist of Venetian music. There’ll be several selections from Claudio Monteverdi’s “Scherzi musicali,” a ciaccone by Francesco Manelli and Giovanni Sances, a tongue-in-cheek lament from Nicolò Fontei’s “Bizzarrie poetiche,” and a jaunt to Bologna courtesy of Maurizio Cazzati’s “Variazioni” for two violins.

The closer is Giovanni Croce’s “Canzon de Contadini,” a humorous madrigal which pokes fun at the Venetians and their dialect.

Suggested admission is \$20.

“This is Capella Intima’s 15th season, and Hammer Baroque’s 10th year of providing monthly concerts without financial barrier to the Hamilton community,” said Roach. “It’s a completely volunteer-run enterprise with all proceeds going directly to the performers onstage. We are particularly grateful for the support of the Church of St. John the Evangelist.”

Saturday, Feb. 1 at 8 p.m. in the First Unitarian Church of Hamilton, 170 Dundurn St. S., Lyla Miklos presents “Young & Beautiful: 50 Years of Music & Memories” with accompanist Juanita Maldonado. Tickets: \$20 at door or via email at lyla50thconcert@gmail.com.

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