

Early Music New York Performs

‘Haydn in Esterhazy’

MILENE FERNANDEZ

NEW YORK—Early music is not just for listening to during the early morning hours. You may relish the subtleties of it at any time of the day. While it's generally thought of as music before Bach or as unattainable music before recordings existed, the director of Early Music New York (EM/NY), Frederick Renz, defines early music more broadly. "It can include anything short of contemporary. Early music could encompass the 19th century if one incorporates historical instruments," he said. It is also a matter of how the music is approached and interpreted in a historically informed manner.

Renz, who calls himself "a kind of grandfather of the early music movement," devoted an entire program to "Papa Haydn." That was the affectionate nickname Joseph Haydn (1732–1809) acquired not only because the composer mentored the likes of Mozart and Beethoven, among others, but also because he's considered the father of the string quartet and the symphony, and is credited for establishing the classical music style.

"I always considered Haydn as a straightforward classical composer—not particularly complex; but when I study his scores, there's ingenious, wonderful detail that he manages as regards to orchestration and harmony. He's worth his salt: easy listening but not at the expense of extraordinary compositional technique!" Renz said.

As the third concert of EM/NY's 43rd season, "Haydn in Esterhazy: Genial Kapellmeister" explored a wide range of forms and contrasting moods, from a stormy symphony, a sublime nocturne, and a somber overture to the buoyant positivity of the "Roxelane" symphony.

"There is considerable variety within Haydn's works," Renz said.

Subtleties and In Betweens

The charm of music played with period instruments and with original techniques is difficult to describe.

Frederick Renz, the director of Early Music New York, prepares ahead of the March 3 concert "Haydn in Esterhazy: Genial Kapellmeister" at the First Church of Christ, Scientist, in New York on Feb. 19.

"The blend of the instruments, the interplay among the violins, violas, and basses is so much more lucid, allowing one to hear the compositional structure clearly," Renz said.

Early string instruments were outfitted with gut strings that produced a much mellower sound than their modern counterparts, which use steel strings. "With historical instruments, vibrato was very sparingly used, if at all, so a player produced a 'purer,' uncomplicated sound," Renz said.

“**My interest encompasses the entire gamut of historical performance, from medieval drama to classical symphonies.**

Frederick Renz, founder, Early Music Foundation

Renz became interested in early music in the 1960s, a time when people reacted against what he calls "an era of plastics and stainless steel." He started collecting antiques, which led him to a stronger interest in musical heritage.



Among all the different things people were innovating in the 1960s and '70s—electronic music, for instance—Renz was exploring what he calls "new-old music." He started investigating and finding innovative ways of interpreting music that was as faithful to the original as he could discern.

"There are a lot of unknowns," Renz said. Because recordings of music performed before the invention of audio recorders do not exist, musicians invariably emulate modern recordings, and to some extent are at the mercy of somebody's interpretation, which is not 100 percent authentic, he explained.

"It's always good practice to reread the old treatises to be reminded of the few rules that have come down to us. For example, what does Leopold Mozart [Wolfgang's father] write about whether one should play an up bow or a down bow in a given situation, as opposed to winging it," he said.

With early music, Renz feels he delves into the best of both worlds. He does all the research and footnoting, he said, "but eventually there's still considerable room to fill in the unknowns by applying one's own 'informed imagination,' thereby re-creating anew."

"The idea of going back in history, conscientiously attempting to recapture concepts of earlier generations, is a rare practice—instead of trying to keep up with the latest trends. But in reality, building on the past in order to create something novel is part of the natural order," Renz said.

Father of the Early Music Revival

Renz founded the Early Music Foundation in 1974, which presents EM/NY. For his pioneering work, he received performance commissions from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Spoleto Festival, and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, among others.

While most early music groups concentrate on a single era of music, every season EM/NY performs four concerts, each one from a different period: Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical. "My interest encompasses the entire gamut of historical performance, from medieval drama to classical symphonies," Renz said.

"I'm always searching for the in-betweens," he said, explaining his penchant for periods at the cusp of a new style—for example, the transition from 17th-century early Baroque to the high-Baroque period. Early Baroque is more polyphonic. "It's not only about a good melody with bass accompaniment, as in classical style; there's beauty to be found in an unaccompanied, medieval melody (monophony) or the intertwining of multiple lines in Renaissance polyphony," he explained.

Early Music New York will perform "Monteverdi Echoes: Venice to Vienna" on Saturday, May 5, at the First Church of Christ, Scientist, at Central Park West and West 68th Street.

