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 music that was arranged 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 grandson 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 was the conductor of Mozart and Beethoven, but also because he is considered the father of the string quartet and the symphony, and is credited with 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 a wonder in them that he manages as regards to orchestration and harmony. He’s worthy of all that—easy listening but not at the expense of extraordinary compositional techniques,” Renz said.

As the third concert of EM/NY’s 3rd season, “Haydn in Esterhazy: Genial Kapellmeister” explored a wide range of forms and contrasted moods, from a stormy symphony, to a notebound nocturne, and a somber overture to the buoyant positivity of the “Roxelane” symphony.

“There is considerable variety within Haydn’s works,” Renz said.

Statistically In Between

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

The blend of the instruments, the interplay among the violins, violas, and basses is much more balanced, 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 ‘purrier,’ uncomplicated sound,” Renz said.

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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 necessarily emulate modern recordings, and to some extent are at the mercy of somebody’s interpretation, which is not 100 percent authentic, he explained.

“I always think of the piano as an extension of the keyboard. It’s also a good challenge to play the old ones,” Renz said. Leopold Mozart (Wolfgang’s father) wrote 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 drives into the best of both worlds. He does all the research and planning, he said, “but eventually there’s still considerable room to fill in the unknowns by applying one’s own informed imagination,” thereby creating answers.

The idea of going back in history, consciously attempting to recapture concepts of earlier generations, is a rare practice—instead of trying to keep up with the latest trends. But in reality, it still is something novel in 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’s 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.

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Early Music New York will perform “Monteverdi ‘Ecco vien Conte di Torino’” on Saturday, May 5, at the First Church of Christ, Scientist, at Central Park West and West 66th Street.