

Classical music review: Baroque Matinéés with Geneviève Soly and Elinor Frey

BY LEV BRATISHENKO, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE SEPTEMBER 19, 2013

MONTREAL - "IN BREVI TATE MAGISTER EST" was written on the wee chamber organ onstage at Bourgie hall. This bad Latin is trying to say "there's a teacher in brevity." I don't know if artistic director Isolde Lagacé was inspired by the device — one of a small collection of baroque instruments that I had no idea were tucked away in Bourgie — but the idea is well-reflected in a new series of 11 a.m. concerts, the Baroque Matinéés, which last about an hour and include commentary by Geneviève Soly.

Would it help to graffiti it on the podium at the Maison Symphonique?

Anyway. After her efficient introduction, Soly accompanied the cellist Elinor Frey, fresh from her win of an audience award at the Utrecht Early Music Festival — in the "fringe" category, which suggests how weird her five-string cello is — and together they played a lively program of late baroque works on three instruments, the first such concert dedicated to Frey's five strings. It was over in an hour.

The opening Sonata by Carl Friedrich Abel was a delight that revealed the range of tonal and textural contrasts between the Flemish harpsichord and baroque cello, and also the remarkable unity that emerges, occasionally, from good playing on period style instruments. Passages seemed to hang between the two voices and not really come from either one of them, which is why I didn't enjoy Soly's switch to the chamber organ for the later pieces. The contrast between toot-toot and the anguished tone of gut strings was too much.

Best of all and most revealing was Frey's performance of the Prelude from Bach's sixth Suite. The baroque instrument has a fascinating inaccuracy, like a slipperiness, that allows the music to expand in the right hands. Anyone numb to these overplayed suites should go to her next concert.

The crowd was surprisingly ample, casually dressed, and peppered with students. It's a pleasure to see some programmatic experiments in the stuffier halls of the city, even if this time slot isn't that radical. The MSO does a series of matinées, too, at 10:30 a.m., though Lagacé is contemplating events at 6 a.m. and midnight.

Lagacé says she's "interested in experimentation, and it's more informal during the day." Yep. Too bad there are only three matinées scheduled for now. They may do more next season if these succeed. Daniel Lanthier, Joël Verkaik, Amanda Keesmaat, and Soly perform at the next one on Feb. 6 at 11 a.m. Details: bourgiehall.ca.

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