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'Bach in İstanbul opens with five Bachs

13 September 2011, Tuesday / ALEXANDRA IVANOFF, İSTANBUL

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If everyone presented the music of Johann Sebastian Bach like Hakan Erdoğan, the old German Baroque master would be on the tip of everyone's tongue.

Erdoğan has a way of presenting music of any genre and giving it a new lease of life. His ninth annual "Bach in İstanbul," running through Sept. 23, takes the stiffness out of Baroque and puts the hipness in.

Part of his formula is putting on his concerts in unusual places, such as cisterns, jails, boats and even places to celebrate the full moon. His most recent series was "Jazz in Ramadan" in Topkapı Palace's courtyard. For "Bach in İstanbul" he's using three venues in Beyoğlu: two churches and Garajistanbul -- not that offbeat, but definitely not stuffy concert halls. Another strategy is finding interesting international artists who represent the authentic and/or take the spirit of the authentic and twist it around to create something entirely unique. Even his printed programs are not the norm; they're more like an art school project.

The series of seven concerts comprising "Bach in İstanbul" began on Sept. 8 and 9 at St. Antoine Church and Santa Maria Church, respectively, featuring the European Union Baroque Orchestra (EUBO). This is no ordinary orchestra. It's actually an educational program founded in 1985 and funded by members of the European Union. EUBO is based in Oxford, UK, and Echternacht, Luxembourg, and was created specifically as a project intended to tour for six months. Practically speaking, it's not only a bridge for music conservatory students to use as a springboard into the professional world, but it's intrinsically a cultural ambassadorship for the European Union. Its musical focus is solely Baroque performance practice, a style that represents the European music of 300 years ago and a specific discipline that is often overlooked by conservatories. The members of this orchestra put aside their modern instruments and invested in Baroque versions for a new career path.

EUBO's director, harpsichordist Lars Ulrik Mortensen, has been at the helm since 2004. "This project is unique because it's designed to exist with these particular personnel only once per year," he explains. "Every April, we audition between 80-100 players. We choose 20-25 young musicians, rehearse and tour from July through December. Then it completely disbands. We start all over again with new players the following year." The young musicians who came to İstanbul to perform their "Bach & Sons" with Mortensen on the keyboard were a group of 15 string players, including their concertmaster and violin soloist, Huw Daniel, and an additional harpsichordist.

The Bach family's music

The two concerts used Johann Sebastian Bach's famous "Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G Major" as their beginning and end, and during the show, works by Handel (a solo violin sonata and an ensemble piece) and three by Bach's sons -- Wilhelm Friedemann, Johann Christian and Carl Philipp Emanuel, and a cousin, Johann Bernard Bach -- were performed. Firstly, these were interesting programs because it's rare to see music by five members of the Bach family scheduled together. Secondly, it's fun to compare them all to each other. Thirdly, since J.S. Bach had several wives and more than 20 children, the age difference among these sons

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Impressions from Erdoğan's tour

is 25 years; thus we can hear stylistic changes from the younger ones. Though they were talented and produced a modest body of work, they are not in the same league as their father. Their works largely represent how musical styles morphed from the Baroque era to the Classical era -- after J.S. Bach's death in 1750.

Wilhelm Friedemann's quirky "Sinfonia in F" from the strong downbeat on, was full of oddball moments and harmonic surprises at the cadences. Johann Christian's "Harpichord Concerto in F minor" was a bit formulaic but still effective as an example of an intrinsically harpsichord piece that could never be translated to the piano. Its keyboard part was as much woven into the fabric of the score as a solo, and many moments were often quickly repeated chords that functioned as both accompaniment and soloistic material. Mortensen gave a robust performance of it along with his own dazzling transcription of J.S. Bach's "Chaconne in A minor" (originally a violin piece).

When the entire group launched into Johann Sebastian's "Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G major," we could hear the source of genius from which not only the other Bachs sprang, but the very foundations of the Baroque era came. EUBO's vivid performance of this strings-and-harpichord masterpiece showed the authenticity of proper Baroque playing as we know it: The characteristic split-second lift before final notes, the use of vibrato solely as ornament and the emphasis on specific architectural points, rather than serious attention to each note. Their collective body language is fun to watch because everyone is completely in sync with each other, and together they build tremendously exciting crescendos.

Mortensen said of the students: "They are all trained on modern instruments, but switch to Baroque for EUBO. Many can continue doing both, others just choose one. But if they choose Baroque, there are plenty of ensembles to join in Europe these days." I asked cellist Gulrim Choi, who is from Paris and recently bought her Baroque cello and bow from a maker in Cologne, which style of playing she liked more -- modern or Baroque. "After this experience, I have to say I've totally fallen in love with the Baroque," she admitted. So much so, that she's moving to Switzerland for further training.

Whether it's five Bachs or just one, Bach is back in İstanbul this month. The series continues on Sept. 16 at Garajistanbul at 8:30 p.m. with electronic composer Erdem Helvacioğlu and percussionist Pete Lockett for their "Bachtronica" adventure in digital sound design with live instruments. Ensuing concerts feature Hungarian cellist Jiri Bartá, and harpsichordists Mahan Eshfahani and Gustav Leonhardt.

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Great article! It's always nice to be able to hear music by some of the less-famous Bachs. The man certainly had lots of kids. I first heard about the EU Baroque Orchestra's concerts through a mention in The Guide Istanbul. If you look at their Agenda section they've got listings for all kinds of ...

Jonathan Simmons  14 September 2011 , 16:47

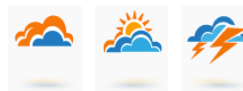
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