

SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY - TON KOOPMAN - MARCH 2015

Ton Koopman brings brass sonorities and brassy rhetoric to SFS at Davies

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The program that Ton Koopman prepared for the second week of his two-week visit to the podium of the San Francisco Symphony (SFS), given its first performance last night in Davies Symphony Hall, was as spirited as last week's program. Once again he used an orchestral suite by George Frideric Handel to serve as an "overture" to a concerto and symphony by Joseph Haydn. This time, however, there was more emphasis on virtuoso playing from the brass section, particularly in the selection of the Haydn concerto but also in the major role played by horns in the Handel.

The concerto was the Hoboken VIIe/1 trumpet concerto in E-flat major, composed in 1796 but not given its first performance until 1800. On that occasion the soloist was Anton Weidinger, showing off his new design for a keyed instrument that would facilitate playing more of the chromatic scale in the lower registers. Haydn had obliged by setting Weidinger any number of challenges, writing for the trumpet with the same sensitivity to modulation and singing melodic lines that he would compose for wind instruments.

Last night the solo part was taken by SFS Principal Trumpet Mark Inouye playing a contemporary valved instrument. This was a wise choice, since Weidinger's approach to covering holes was soon replaced by the system of valves that directs the breath through different lengths of pipe. The Haydn biography by Karl and Irene Geiringer has argued that holes "detracted from the brilliant tone," basically interfering with the harmonic spectrum (my explanation, not theirs); and they describe Weidinger's instrument as sounding like a "Demented Oboe."

With its smooth vocal qualities, Haydn's concerto definitely does not deserve such invective. Playing on a modern instrument, Inouye's polished sonorities captured all of the nuances of those singing qualities in Haydn's melodic lines. Most impressive was his control of dynamics. He may have summoned attention with a forte fanfare; but his command of piano in the more lyric passages was just as effective as the "brassier" martial rhetoric. Throughout Haydn's traversal of the dynamic range, Koopman was always on the same level with Inouye, providing just the right balance for the exchanges between solo and ensemble. Inouye also provided his own cadenzas, providing further exercise of his virtuosity without ever sounding out of place in Haydn's context.

Haydn's concerto was "introduced" by equally challenging writing for two horns by Handel. This was the first suite (HWV 348) in F major from the Water Music collection, in

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which the wind parts for two oboes and bassoon are matched in many of the movements by elaborate horn parts. These were taken by Principal Horn Robert Ward and Jonathan Ring, both playing natural horns. While this music may have lacked Haydn's imaginative modulations and stuck, for the most part, to the basic "fanfare" overtones, it still offered up some challenging trills, handled (for the most part) deftly by both players. There was much more to this music than the impressive horn work, including some delightful duo work by Associate Concertmaster Nadya Tichman and Acting Associate Principal Second Violin Paul Brancato. However, the horns stole the show, as they probably did when they entertained King George I on his now-famous boat ride down the Thames.

Both horns and trumpets were included in the Haydn symphony performed after the intermission, Hoboken I/98 in B-flat major; but this was much more definitely ensemble music (except for a "surprise" coda involving Tichman's solo violin accompanied by Robin Sutherland at the harpsichord). This symphony was composed in 1792 during Haydn's first trip to England. While it is not as well known as many of his other late symphonies, it serves as a prime example of the composer's capacity for structural sophistication and wit. Both are in play in the opening movement, in which the Adagio opens the symphony with a dark moody theme that is almost mournful; but that same theme slips off its widow's weeds and prances around sassily (brassily?) in bright colors throughout the following Allegro.

Koopman clearly took great joy in leading this symphony. One could readily sense his pleasure in making sure that those of us on audience side did not miss any of Haydn's witty tropes, but he was just aware of how much Haydn had packed into this work's structural sophistication. The reduced SFS ensemble was committed to his approach from beginning to end, and he was more than generous in making sure that all players were properly acknowledged.

The only curiosity involved Sutherland sitting idle in the back until it was time to accompany Tichman in the final coda. By most accounts Haydn was at the keyboard when this symphony was played in London, and there is no reason to believe that he did not play in all four movements. Granted, the score does not call for a continuo (which was long out of fashion by 1792); and the part is marked specifically as "Cembalo Solo." It's just hard to imagine Haydn sitting on his hands while waiting for that solo!