

Ton Koopman
CINCINNATI SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Taft Theatre
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By Janelle Gelfand

Conductor offers fresh take on Baroque gems with CSO



No matter how many times you've heard J.S. Bach's "Air on the G String" at weddings and memorials, the performance given on Friday by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra was an eye-opener.

The all-Baroque concert led by Ton Koopman in his Cincinnati debut was like a breath of fresh air. Koopman, a native of The Netherlands and founder of the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra, led some of the greatest hits of the Baroque by Handel and Bach. Even though the music is familiar to many, his interpretations were fresh and thoughtful, and the playing was polished

and exuberant. And no one seemed to be having as much fun as Koopman, who conducted and also led from the keyboard.

The Taft Theatre, where the orchestra is performing while Music Hall undergoes renovation, offered a more intimate setting for this music of the 18th century, which calls for smaller forces. True, the acoustics at the Taft sometimes made it hard for the listener to hear the harpsichord that anchored the ensembles. But the counterpoint was crystal-clear. And how wonderful it was to hear Bach's "Brandenburg" Concerto No. 3 with just 10 strings and harpsichord, not performed by the CSO since 1986.

Koopman's view was "historically informed" – following the performing style of this musical era. That meant the strings used little vibrato, percussionists whacked with hard sticks and phrases sometimes had the addition of tasteful ornaments.

The conductor opened with Handel's Suite No. 1 in F Major from "Water Music," a set of dance movements written for King George I, and premiered on the Thames River in 1717. With only about 30 musicians, including strings, winds and horns, it was a buoyant and detailed journey. Koopman's tempos were not overly brisk, which allowed the horns (Elizabeth Freimuth and Lisa Conway) to shine in Handel's wonderful solos. At the harpsichord, Michael Unger, a faculty member at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, provided a lively cadenza just before the finale.

In a traditional pairing, Handel's "Music for the Royal Fireworks" followed, with the added fireworks of brass and percussion. From the opening drum-rolls, it was superbly executed, with many fine contributions from orchestral soloists. The three trumpeters (Douglas Lindsay, Steven Pride and

John Rommel) made a vibrant sound in Handel's high-flying themes and fanfares. Koopman was a vigorous leader, and even the "Largo" movement had the pomp and weight befitting of royalty.

After intermission, the conductor took a seat at the harpsichord for a rewarding performance of J.S. Bach's "Brandenburg" Concerto No. 3 in G Major. Koopman provided a richly expressive "Adagio" solo linking the two fast movements. Acting assistant concertmaster Kathryn Woolley was an animated presence as she galvanized her fellow musicians. It was riveting to watch as they traded phrases, arrayed in a semi-circle around Koopman's harpsichord.

To conclude the morning concert, Koopman led a stylish reading of Bach's Suite No. 3 in D Major. Tempos were very quick, sometimes a bit too much so for my taste. Even the famous "Air" had momentum, but it also had immense beauty of line. Listeners were on their feet.

<http://www.cincinnati.com/story/entertainment/2016/11/11/conductor-offers-fresh-take-baroque-gems-cso/93652296/>