

Music Review

We think Bach is basic. For an orchestra, it's a departure.



Conductor Ton Koopman led the National Symphony Orchestra on Thursday during an evening of Bach and Handel. (Marco Borggreve)

By [Anne Midgette](#) May 18 at 11:20 PM

We think a lot about how orchestras need to change with the times. The National Symphony Orchestra's Thursday night program of Bach and Handel (which repeats Friday and Saturday) shows one big way that they have.

Time was when orchestras would put all the music they played through the same filter, adjusting pieces from the canon so that they all came out with a similar dense, rich, thick sound — think of recordings of Mozart from the 1930s. Today, our tastes are more catholic, and our sense of period style more pronounced, and orchestras, called upon to play a wider range of music than ever, have become vastly more flexible. So it is that the NSO is able to play a whole evening of passable Bach and Handel, under the early-music specialist Ton Koopman, and make a real event of it, sounding leaner and more brassy and quite a bit different than they sound on most of their other subscription concerts.

Bach and Handel, born the same year, are both classics, and yet they are not exactly standard orchestral fare — apart from ubiquities like the annual “Messiah.” The expansion of historically informed performance, to a point where it at least registers in the course of most literate orchestral musicians' education, has underscored the distinction: We have access to this music in a wide range of performances and recordings on original instruments with gut strings and a kind of improvisatory spirit that is largely foreign to a full-time professional American orchestra. It was striking, then, how well the NSO's horns and oboes and

bassoons, in particular, rose to the considerable challenges posed by the program's four works: Bach's third orchestral suite and first Brandenburg concerto on the first half, and Handel's third Concerto a due cori and Music for the Royal Fireworks on the second. There wasn't a soloist on this program, but the individual players had a lot of heavy lifting.

What was displayed here was the extroverted side of Baroque music, the showy energetic virtuosity, emphatically brought out by Koopman's big gestures and windmilling arms. The opening of the Bach orchestral suite seemed to augur ill for the evening, blaring and a little heavy, but the overall tone settled into something lightly raucous, appropriate to this music, and Koopman got the famous "Air," the second movement of the suite and the best-known excerpt of the evening, to achieve a kind of emphatically impetuous grace. The Brandenburg was a tour de force, its final movement alternating small dance forms played on a few instruments, led by the tireless horns, with statements and restatements of a Menuetto, or minuet, from the massed strings.

Showier still was the Handel. The concertos a due cori, featuring two distinct groups of brass and winds and harpsichords engaging in a kind of call-and-response across the stage, are thought to have been written as intermission features for some of Handel's stage works, and needed to be attention-grabbing. And the Royal Fireworks Music, another of Handel's most familiar pieces on modern orchestral concerts, adds the rat-a-tat of timpani and percussion to the palette, sealing the sense of event, and a sense that the orchestra, despite its usual moments of raggedness, had stepped outside itself.

The program repeats Friday at 11:30 a.m. and Saturday at 8 p.m.

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