

TON KOOPMAN

Yo-Yo MA, cello

BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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Seeking the BSO's inner period instrument band

By Jeremy Eichler, Globe Staff | January 8, 2010

The rise of the early music movement in recent decades has meant, among other things, a narrowing of the repertoire for modern symphony orchestras. These days, it's relatively rare to hear an orchestra like the BSO play Baroque or early classical music, as that stretch of the musical timeline has become the province of specialized period instrument ensembles. Every once in a while, however, an emissary from the early music world can be spotted on the podium of a modern symphony orchestra, coaxing it to think differently about tempo and phrasing, to shed some of the weight in its sound, and in short, to discover its inner period instrument band.

That's what's happening this week in Symphony Hall, as the sprightly Dutch early music pioneer **Ton Koopman**, founder of the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra, is leading the BSO in works by Haydn and C.P.E. Bach as well as Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony. His approach last night yielded mostly felicitous results. It also helped to have **Yo-Yo Ma** on hand as the evening's soloist, offering up a beautifully poised and richly expressive account of Haydn's Cello Concerto No. 1.

To these ears, Koopman's chemistry with the orchestra did not fully click in for the opening work, Haydn's Symphony No. 98. Conducting from the harpsichord, he led a generally buoyant and lilting account but some of the wit and charm of the outer movements did not fully translate nor did the deep pathos of the Adagio.

The cello concerto followed, with Ma, Koopman, and the orchestra bringing the first movement across as a kind of dance-like chamber music. The slow movement was even more striking for its tastefully understated solo playing. The cello's first entrance here is like a focused beam of light emerging from within the ensemble. Ma found a way to inflect this single held note with all the restrained beauty of the movement as a whole, playing quietly and without vibrato at first, as if to incubate the tone before floating it across the footlights. The finale was lithe and fleet.

The BSO had never performed C.P.E. Bach's Symphony in G until last night, but Koopman helped the orchestra carry it off with a certain breeziness and charm. The conductor kept the ensemble modest in size for the Schubert symphony, which also allowed him to keep textures light and the playing clean, clear, and well-shaped. Some might miss the more familiar Romantic heft, but I found it rewarding to consider this iconic work through the ears of one steeped in the music that preceded it. ■