

A Breath of Baroque Air

by Michael Lodico | Friday, November 13, 2009

This review is an Ionarts exclusive.

The Zephyrus Ensemble performed an outstanding program of music from the French Baroque period at the National Gallery of Art for their free Wednesday series at midday. In conjunction with the exhibit *Renaissance to Revolution: French Drawings from the National Gallery of Art, 1500–1800*, some works of art were strategically placed outside of the lecture hall, including the life-size, highly ornate 1756 *Group Portrait* by François-Hubert Drouais. It contained outlandish clothing, pitchers, jewels, and a clock that would make any still life envious, and gentle faces beside a leftward Vermeer-style window. The Zephyrus Ensemble, boasting five of the most outstanding early music musicians in North America, led the audience through a seventy-minute survey of the French Baroque. François Couperin's Second Concert from the *Concerts Royaux* (1722) had an ornate gentleness reminiscent of the Drouais hanging outside. At times, the level of stylish ornamentation was so intricate that it was difficult to decipher the principal notes played by violinist Ingrid Matthews (current Music Director of Seattle Baroque). The gentle continuo of gamba, theorbo, and harpsichord created their own acoustic, filling the acoustically challenged lecture hall as attacks and releases were often sumptuous flourishes. It is important to note that this abundantly florid style was more or less in tempo; also, Zephyrus's approach to *notes inégales* is seemingly more creative than what was recently heard from Opera Lafayette.

Jean-Phillipe Rameau's movements from *Pièces de clavecin en concert* (1741) featured harpsichordist Jillon Stoppels Dupree. A student of Dutch master Gustav Leonhardt, she was able to shine given that instead of expecting the keyboardist to create harmonies from figured bass, Rameau wrote out a virtuosic keyboard part. Dupree's expressiveness in the *Coulicam*, *Livri*, and *Vézinet* movements derived from her sensitive touch and careful awareness of dissonance: the work contained the contrapuntal sophistication of a Brandenburg Concerto, yet with French flair.

Theorbo player John Lenti intimately performed *Logistille* by Lully, and viola da gamba player Josh Lee offered lovely high notes and triple stops in Marin Marais's *Les voix humaines* (1701). During an emotional performance of Jean-Féry Rebel's *Chaconne* from the Suite in G Major (1705), Matthews held the standing-room-only audience in the palm of her hand. All joined in for Telemann's Quartet No. 6 in E minor ("Paris," 1736). A francophile at heart, like our dear moderator here at Ionarts, Telemann ended his six-movement Quartet with a lush passacaglia that intermingled upward chromatic figures with circular shapes, performed here by exceptional musicians blissfully in love with their craft.