

## Where Sheep Safely Graze, The Sebastians Follow

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**United States Haydn, Mozart, C.P.E. Bach:** Paul Wonjin Cho (clarinet), The Sebastians, The Liederkrantz Club, New York City. 20.10.2012 (AS)

**C.P.E. Bach:** Symphony in E minor, Wq 178

**Mozart:** Clarinet Concerto in A major, K. 622

**Haydn:** Symphony No. 79 in F

**Mozart:** Symphony No. 40 in G minor, KV. 550

Rumors of classical music's death have been greatly exaggerated, as Mark Twain might have commented, had he attended *Classical Portraits*, a concert featuring the young period instrument orchestra The Sebastians at New York's Liederkrantz Club. The sold-out performance was the second offering in the fourth season of the Salon/Sanctuary concert series, productions that have rapidly become a favorite destination of New York's early music crowd.

In the intimate second-floor space at Liederkrantz—a club dedicated to German musical culture where chandeliers hang, drapes of Prussian blue festoon the stately windows, and a few individual portraits and landscapes of sheep safely grazing line the walls—the 21 musicians treated their audience to a feast of C.P.E. Bach, Haydn, and Mozart. The two fine violinists Daniel Lee and Alexander Woods took turns leading the pack, both with a reassuring sense of relaxed command.

What is considered a contemporary sound can change in every era, and works that were revolutionary a couple of centuries ago can be perceived as staid and unimaginative when mishandled by leviathan orchestras. At the same time, familiar masterpieces of the Classical canon performed in informed style on historical instruments can seem positively revolutionary to modern listeners, as textures previously obscured by heavy vibrato suddenly attain crystalline clarity in the hands of skilled period instrument players.

The Sebastians took us on a delightful journey, one in which lucid, subtle playing left space for the emotion and wit that Haydn expressed in his Symphony No. 79 in F. The strings and woodwinds engaged in a lively discussion throughout, at times chatty and light-hearted, but veering toward stately thoughts and eloquent silences, notably in the beginning of the second movement (*Adagio cantabile*).

Mozart's Clarinet Concerto in A featured the superb clarinetist Paul Wonjin Cho, who played with fleet virtuosity and soulful, communicative phrasing. Hearing him play, it was easy to imagine the excitement Mozart must have felt in writing this piece for his good friend, the virtuoso Anton Stadler, a member of the Viennese imperial court orchestra. Authentic and reproduction instruments can be notoriously testy, subject to vagaries of humidity and climate that can wreak havoc with tuning and clarity. That the Indian-summer evening seemed to challenge Cho for mere nanoseconds here and there is testament not only to his individual talent, but to the promise held by the new crop of younger practitioners of early music in New York.

The *Classical Portraits* concert would not have been complete, of course, without an image of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, a far more famous Bach in his day than his father. CPE Bach influenced Mozart and Haydn and generations of composers after, by advocating for—and writing—music to reflect human emotions and passions. The Sebastians played his subversive Symphony in E minor with humor, warmth and drama—it was subversive music in 1756, and apparently convention can still be stood on its head in 2012.

By the end of the program—Mozart's Symphony No. 40 in G minor—the audience had been thoroughly seduced by the ensemble's deft balance of firebrand playing and classical elegance. These are no staid, hidebound formalists—they're the mediums through which the new music of

the past is brought into the present. They, as well as the upcoming concerts of the Salon/Sanctuary season, are not to be missed.

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