

JUNE 15, 2013, 6:52 PM

Echoes of Folly at Early Music Fringe Events

By *JAMES R. OESTREICH*

BOSTON – The theme of the Boston Early Music Festival this year is “Youth: Genius and Folly,” so it seemed a good idea to catch up with some young, rising stars in the field. A convenient opportunity presented itself on Friday afternoon with short concerts by Mylène Bélanger, a harpsichordist, and by the Sebastians, an instrumental group.

These were not official events of the festival but instead part of the Fringe festival that accompanies it. Ms. Bélanger, 31, was presented by the Harpsichord Clearing House of Rehoboth, Mass., in its large exhibition room at the Revere Hotel. She is part of Pallade Musica, a Montreal-based instrumental group, which won Early Music America’s first Baroque Performance Competition in New York last October.

The Harpsichord Clearing House discovered her, a spokesman said, when she traveled to Rehoboth to try out an instrument that she promptly bought. “We were astounded by her playing,” he added.

As well they might have been. Ms. Bélanger displayed a fluent, agile technique in Bach’s English Suite in G minor (BWV 808), then turned to increasingly virtuosic French works. Her performances of Rameau and Forqueray were rich and vital. But it was in her finale, Joseph-Nicolas-Panrace Royer’s thickly textured showpiece “La Marches des Scythes” that she genuinely astounded, raising prodigies of sonority without the slightest muss or fuss.

The Sebastians, who average about 30 in age, also took part in that performance competition and won the audience appreciation prize. Presented here in Early Music America’s Young Performers Festival at the First Church Boston, they are Daniel S. Lee and Alexander Woods, violinists; Ezra Seltzer, cellist; and Jeffrey Grossman, keyboardist.

They take their name from Johann Sebastian Bach but played none of his music here, offering instead a trio sonata by Handel, a church sonata by Corelli and flashier works by other Italians: Dario Castello, Giuseppe Colombi and Vivaldi. The performances were everywhere sharp-edged and engaging.

But it was Vivaldi’s “Folia” that I had come to hear, still living with the memory of a blazing account by Reinhard Goebel and his Musica Antiqua Köln at the Metropolitan Museum some three decades ago. The Sebastians’ was the first performance I have heard to rival it in virtuosity and perhaps exceed it in its depiction of madness, within mere seconds veering between barely audible pianissimos and wild fortissimos. The Sebastians tout this as their signature rendition,

and with good reason.

It was nice that both concerts, part of the official festival or not, could touch on another element of the festival theme: folly. In Ms. Bélanger's case, it was "Jupiter," the last movement of Antoine Forqueray's Fifth Suite, that did the trick. There were those who thought Forqueray a bit crazy, Ms. Bélanger told the audience, and he did his best to prove it here.

An afternoon exceedingly well spent.