

**Concert Report: Akron Baroque's 'Glorious Vivaldi'  
at First Congregational Church (May 18)**

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by Daniel Hathaway



Akron Baroque brought its fourth season to a festive conclusion on Tuesday evening, May 18 at First Congregational Church with a well chosen and expertly performed selection of Baroque curiosities and a rare, professional performance of an old warhorse.

Led by Guy Victor Bordo, with Alan Bodman as concertmaster, the thirteen-member string and keyboard ensemble was joined by three wind players for music by Geminiani, Boccherini and Alessandro Scarlatti -- a trio of enticing pieces of music you're just not going to run into every day.

Francesco Geminiani's Concerto Grosso in e, op. 3, no. 3 was introduced by Mr. Bordo, who

gave a charming and accessible lesson in counterpoint to the large and generationally diverse audience. "If you had a room full of people talking at the same time, you couldn't make any sense out of what was being said, but with music you can do exactly that!" Akron Baroque plays on modern instruments, but manages to achieve admirable clarity while producing a full, healthy string sound. Here the musicians have the benefit of playing in a very agreeable venue -- not only is the sanctuary of First Congregational Church, opened in 1910 and lovingly restored in 2006, visually stunning, with its wraparound gallery and curvaceous staircases, it's also a warm and supportive acoustical environment which allows the listener to hear every one of those simultaneous musical conversations.

The violins reseeded themselves for the next two works, which put Cory Smith in the driver's seat. Luigi Boccherini, doomed to fame through a little minuet, turns out to have much more to say. His "Music of the Streets of Madrid" is an eventful little tone poem involving drumming soldiers, blind beggars dancing a minuet, street singers doing a passacaglia and the retreat of the Night Watch, all of which became familiar to the composer while he was in the service of the younger brother of the King of Spain. Special effects abounded -- the imitation of bells through hefty pizzicati, cellists and violinists playing their instruments like guitars, strings producing drum effects through violent tremolos. Akron Baroque obviously had fun with this one, and so did the audience.

Alessandro Scarlatti's Sinfonie No. II in D, one of five "Sinfonie di concerto grosso" dating from 1715, incorporates the unlikely solo combination of flute and trumpet, winningly played by George Pope and Larry Herman, who somehow brought their disparate instruments into a common timbre. This pre-classical work features fast scales, adroitly negotiated by the strings, fugal sections, register contrasts (the treble instruments have a movement to themselves) and sprightly motives. The work was nicely paced, masterfully played and fun to hear.

After intermission, during which the audience interacted with the musicians as though this was a big family picnic, Akron Baroque unveiled its new Chamber Choir, a twelve-singer ensemble hand picked and thoroughly prepared by chorus master James Mismas -- and the fulfillment of a longtime dream of founder and violinist Amy Barlowe. For its maiden voyage, the chorus took on what might seem to be a leaky boat: Vivaldi's Gloria, a piece beloved of and overperformed by high school choirs and amateur instrumental ensembles. The choice was, in fact, inspired, as we got to hear a nuanced and detailed performance of what is really a cleverly conceived, radiant work.

For Vivaldi, the strings were joined by oboist Thomas Moore and trumpeter Larry Herman, who managed to get inside each other's tone and sound both brilliant and melded at the same time. When the chorus entered with "Gloria", its tone was rich and well blended both within itself and with the orchestra. In the remaining movements, the singers neatly sang their way through tricky and sometimes craggy melismas, and produced amazing volumes of tone at climaxes.

Vivaldi having been in charge of a choir of young female orphans, all the vocal solos are

reserved for sopranos and altos. Effrat Schuldiner and Laurel Seeds were well matched in the soprano duet "Laudamus te", and Susan Wallin beautifully shaped her phrases in "Domine Deus", enhanced by the eloquent (and vibratoless) oboe playing of Thomas Moore. Mezzo sopranos Debra Bordo and Denise Milner Howell were differently lovely in "Domine Deus, Agnus Dei" and "Qui sedes". Maestro Bordo brought the work to a thrilling conclusion with a very speedy version of "Cum Sancto Spiritu". A special bow to Valerie Thorson, who stylishly played harpsichord continuo on the first half of the program, then moved to the organ where, by means of a rear-view mirror, she did an equally splendid job with the Vivaldi.

Informed but not by shackled by historic performance practice, Akron Baroque produced an unfussy and thoroughly accessible concert of little heard but instantly attractive music. The ensemble obviously has a devoted following and will expand its season next year to include four concerts at First Congregational and Westminster Presbyterian churches. Well worth the drive from Cleveland!