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Music Review: Bach Consort opens weekend series

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WORCESTER - “All Bach All Weekend,” a marathon of six concerts spanning some of the high points of J.S. Bach’s orchestral and chamber music output, kicked off with a free concert on Friday night at Clark University’s Razzo Hall. Curated by Peter Sulski and the Bach Consort of Worcester, the opening program consisted of three concertos and the B-minor Orchestral Suite.

The latter is, of course, a kind of concerto in itself, featuring an extensive solo part traditionally played by the flute. On Friday, violinist Joshua Peckins took on that role. While one missed the normal contrast of timbres between wind instrument and strings, Peckins ably nailed his solo turns, executing the “Polonaise” and “Badinerie” with particular brilliance.

For their part, the Consort played with plenty of energy. Theirs was, rhythmically, a strong performance, a transitional flub at the end of the “Overture” notwithstanding. Granted, it was a bit monodynamic, texturally – the extremes of dynamic contrast can be tricky to perfect in a cozy hall like Razzo and it took until Friday’s second half for things to fully click – but this Suite was a vigorous one, all the same.

The latter can also be said of the performance of the E-major Violin Concerto that followed.

In it, Sulski was the soloist. He’s a violinist with a robust tone that suited the outer movements particularly well (the finale was conspicuously nimble). And, in the slow movement, the solo part spoke amiably.

By and large, the Consort matched him in articulation and temperament. There were a couple of patches of sour intonation and some of the balance issues from earlier remained, but this accompaniment danced in the outer movements and helped anchor the middle one with appropriate gravitas.

Appropriately, the evening's most intriguing offering was also its rarest selection: the Viola Concerto in E-flat major. Reconstructed from a Bach harpsichord concerto plus a couple of cantata movements (which themselves were reworkings of earlier pieces by Bach), it's a substantial, personable score with some lovely, unexpected harmonic wanderings to boot.

Sulski, now playing the solo viola part, made a strong case for the piece, his dusky tone capably cutting through the Consort's characterful accompaniment.

Friday's concert ended with a pert, virile reading of the famous D-minor Concerto for Two Violins, Strings and Continuo. Soloists Angel Hernandez and Jorge Soto proved a simpatico pair, trading off phrases and gestures like a couple of tennis players volleying across a court.

And the Consort – anchored by the night's trusty continuo of harpsichordist Michelle Graveline, cellist Ariana Falk and bass Nathan Varga – slipped into a groove from the downbeat and never fell out of it. Here everything spoke and sang as it should. The climax of suspensions just before the close of the finale packed a welcome, dramatic punch, while the gorgeous middle movement soared.

In all, it was a promising start to this mini-festival, highlights of which include arrangements for strings of "The Art of the Fugue" (on Saturday night) and the "Goldberg Variations" (on Sunday afternoon), plus the Third and Sixth "Brandenburg" Concertos (late Sunday afternoon).