

An Electrifying Journey With Musica Pacifica

Washington Post: Tuesday, January 23, 2007

The late 17th century was a heady time to be a musician in the British Isles. The death in 1685 of the puritanical Oliver Cromwell unleashed a storm of creativity, and a wealth of unusual new music -- ranging from the grotesque to the sublime -- was the result.

The California-based Musica Pacifica brought some of this intriguing music to the Mansion at Strathmore on Sunday afternoon -- and showed why its musicians have been winning an international reputation as early music specialists. Opening with Henry Purcell's freewheeling "Suite From Abdelazer" and delving into everything from traditional Scots folk tunes to elegant, British-inspired suites from Italian composers of the day, the ensemble delivered a vivid and superbly controlled performance.

Judith Linsenberg, darting with birdlike agility among half a dozen recorders, took the lead for much of the afternoon.

It's rare to hear this temperamental instrument played well, but Linsenberg has a robust, throaty and beautifully supported tone, and fingers even the most daunting passages with ease. She particularly shone in an early Jacobean masque -- a sort of burlesque dance described by Ben Jonson as "a spectacle of strangeness" -- negotiating its head-over-heels shifts of color, rhythm and tempo with nonchalant style and wit.

But it was an even greater pleasure to hear violinist Elisabeth Blumenstock, whose understanding of the early baroque was absolutely compelling. In virtually everything she played -- particularly a suite by Michael Locke -- Blumenstock combined a vividly authentic approach with phrasing of riveting thoughtfulness and depth. And when the entire ensemble (including Janet Strauss on violin, David Morris on viola da gamba and Charles Sherman manning the harpsichord) played, the effect was transporting -- a small miracle of precision and musical electricity.

-- Stephen Brookes