

Annual festival big on Bach

Composer's name rare in concert programs

But fans continue to champion his music

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CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC



Exceptional talent may not be a guarantee of everlasting fame. But it does improve your chances of finding tireless champions.

Musicians, conductors, teachers and musicologists agree that Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) is one of the greatest Western composers who ever lived. Yet by the time he died, his music was out of fashion.

It took early Romantic composer Felix Mendelssohn to re-introduce Germans to their countryman in the early 19th century. The ensuing enthusiasm created a Bach *Gesellschaft* (company) to definitively compile and catalogue his surviving works. The members didn't finish their task until the late 1800s.

The late pianist Rosalyn Tureck once said that Bach's compositions contain everything a performer needs both technically and aesthetically.

There is plenty of Bach on disc. But if you scan North American concert programs, his name doesn't come up very often.

Since the advent of the period-performance movement three decades ago, symphony orchestras, still the main draw of classical music audiences, no longer play his concertos. Our church choirs assume the German texts are too remote and the music too difficult. Pianists prefer showier pieces from the 19th century. And who listens to organists these days?

Even period ensembles like the Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra and Choir program Bach as only one of many 18th-century European masters.

Yet every performance of a Bach work is a fresh reminder of how his music contains something for everyone. It is as lively and alive today as it was 300 years ago.

Bach needs champions to take up the cause of his music's enchanting beauty for each new generation of listeners.

One such missionary is Doreen Rao, artistic director of the International Bach Festival, which begins its third annual in-

stalment tomorrow.

Bach authority Helmuth Rilling returns as coach and conductor. This year's festival includes three cantatas (works for orchestra, soloists and/or choir) at Walter Hall and Trinity-St. Paul's Church, and organ recitals at the Church of the Redeemer, at Bloor St. W. and Avenue Rd.

Rao even commissioned a new cantata, drawing material from a number of Western and Eastern traditions that have some relevance in Bach's subject matter, from composer Imant Raminsh. It gets its world premiere next Saturday.

Rao settles comfortably into her office chair at University of Toronto's Edward Johnson Building. Her office, piled high with books, musical scores, papers and mementoes, smells of incense.

"It's from Bhutan," she says, with a smile and a wave of her arms. She possesses an air of being at peace with the world, even with throngs of demanding students beyond her door.

As the conversation deepens, Rao's voice rises in pitch, her eyes sparkle. Within minutes, she is leaning forward with the fire of a true believer.

Rao describes the festival as creating "a circle around Bach that crosses the boundaries of the secular and the sacred in the same way that his music does."

She details why she feels his music remains relevant in all ages: "Bach is the perfect intersection between the old and the new, the ancient and the modern. What a wonderful message that sends to us today (when) looking to the past and looking to the future."

This inclusiveness extends to people of all ethnicities, says Rao.

"When I see my young students, who have never sung Bach, light up like a candle when they read through some of these chorales and choruses, I think, wow, I guess it really does make a difference in their lives," she says. "Why can't the audiences also not feel that way?"

To make the beauty of Bach accessible to as many people as possible, the festival has information as well as music.

"People can actually come for the after-

noon and by going to the lecture and then to the open rehearsals, get insight not only into the composition and the music itself, but also the drama and, very importantly, the way in which artists go about learning the material.

"It is an insight not only about the material itself but also the music-makers who bring that humanity to the performance. Then, by the time you get to the 6 o'clock concert, you're set."

Rao loves how beautifully the words and music work together.

In his 1904 preface to Albert Schweitzer's landmark study of Bach's music, the great French composer and organist Charles-Marie Widor wrote how his eyes were opened when he first saw Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*: "Everything explained itself and became illuminated, not only the great themes of the composition but also the tiniest detail. Music and poetry were intertwined, each musical sketch met up with a literary idea ... the whole became to me a series of poems of unequalled eloquence and emotional intensity."

Rao had the same experience while directing the children's chorus for a Chicago Symphony performance early in her career.

"These children's voices, that was the draw," she says, beaming. "You had this 19th-century sound around you and suddenly you heard the children singing the *cantus firmus* and then, oh ... my ... God," she drops to a whisper, "there's *Bach*."

"From then on I knew I wanted to hear children singing Bach. I started editing melodies and duets from the cantatas and feeding them to choirs for breakfast, lunch and dinner."

Rao walks over to shelves lined with binders containing hundreds of scores she continues to edit and prepare for publisher Boosey & Hawkes.

"When I started my life as a conductor and teacher, I believed that the greatest music could belong to every child ... One of the things I had to carry out in my life was how to translate the greatest musical ideas of our time to belong to the children ... introducing Bach, Britten and Bartók to young people in a steady diet."

Rao says children take instantly to Bach music. It's less adventurous adults who sometimes aren't willing to give it a try. Perhaps this is the week to change that.