

News Summary



ATTENTION:

Stephanie Thompson

Bach Collegium

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Bach Collegium fills niche with period instruments



Hospitality Beat

By Jada Thomas

Ruben Valenzuela is the founder and music director of Bach Collegium San Diego and director of music and the organist at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Del Mar.

Q: What exactly is a collegium, and why did you choose it as the name of your group?

A: In the general sense, I think of a "collegium" as a group of like-minded individuals working toward a similar goal. However, I chose the name after an ensemble that I admire called the Bach Collegium Japan, one of the premier early music ensembles working today.

Q: What is early music, and how is it different from classical music?

A: Early music is a general term that encompasses everything from music of the Middle Ages through the end of the 18th century (i.e., Mozart, Haydn, early Beethoven). Classical music, in the truest sense, is the era in music that followed the Baroque period, best exemplified by the composers Mozart and Haydn.

Q: How does Bach Collegium fit into the San Diego performing arts community?

A: We are the only professional ensemble in San Diego that is comprised of a period instrument orchestra and chorus. We fluctuate in size depending on the project and

therefore can cover a varied and diverse repertoire from the 16th to 18th centuries. I like to think that we are filling a niche by concentrating our efforts on a repertoire and approach not taken by other local ensembles.

Q: How do you select the works you want to perform and the artists to perform them? Are they mostly local or from out of town?

A: The last two seasons I have programmed from the early music "Top 40" in an effort to introduce our approach to San Diego audiences whose interest might not be piqued otherwise. Works have included Vivaldi "Gloria," Bach "Magnificat," and Monteverdi "1610 Vespers" and, most recently, Mozart "Requiem." Here and there I've been able to sneak in lesser-known works, such as Handel "Theodora," to keep audiences on their toes.

I tend to select musicians with whom I've worked or have heard at music festivals, and through the recommendation of trusted colleagues. In regard to instrumentalists, this is particularly difficult because professional period instrument players do not exist in San Diego. This translates into having to import players from Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York City and Boston.

In regard to choral singers, I have a pool of mostly local singers that I call for projects. For soloists, I cast my net farther in an effort to pair singers with a repertoire that I think they can communicate well, or which I have personally heard them communicate well.

Overall, I enjoy working with young singers, as they generally don't have preconceived ideas about a repertoire.

Q: How has the economy affected the state of the arts in San Diego? What are the current challenges of putting on a performing arts season?

A: In my opinion, it has forced companies and ensembles to stop taking artistic risks because of the need to play it safe, or worse, to dilute the product in the name of accessibility.

In regard to challenges, it would have to be funding. It is a major challenge for any arts organization but in particular for a young organization such as the BCSD, now entering our ninth season. Since we're the new kids on the block, I suspect this puts us lower on the totem pole for funding, despite the fact that we are filling a major void in the arts community. As such, we rely heavily on private donations.

Q: What would you say to someone considering attending an early music concert for the first time? What can they expect? How can they connect to what they are hearing?

A: Expect to hear music-making that is improvisatory and very much in the moment, along the lines of a jazz ensemble. In the case of Baroque music, only a small percentage of the music is on the page, which requires musicians to work from a blueprint to bring the music to life. This can be very exciting to hear and watch and sets it aside from later music in which most of the music is on the page.

Regardless of musical tastes



Ruben Valenzuela

or preferences, I believe all of us can recognize or be moved by energy, creativity and basic human feelings that we all share. In order to connect, we need to let go of those misguided ideas we have about classical music. Just listen ... they're not true!

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