

# THE PLAIN DEALER

## Ensemble masters bass lines with balance, smooth blends

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It's always a pleasure to hear music that colors outside the lines, exploding forms and defying expectations.

That such music would figure prominently on a program by an ensemble called American Baroque might come as a surprise, but the sound of modern music played on baroque instruments made perfect sense as rendered by the group's six versatile musicians Wednesday evening at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Their program was called "Uncommon Grounds: The Art of the Repeating Bass Line," and it featured works by French Baroque masters Joseph Bodin de Boismortier, Louis-Antoine Dornel and Marin Marais cheek-by-jowl with recent compositions by Marc Mellits, Carolyn Yarnell and Roy Whelden, who is American Baroque's viola da gambist and composer-in-residence.

From the first notes of Boismortier's Concerto in E minor, it was evident that American Baroque is a group that plays with an uncanny sense of balance. The smooth blend of flute, oboe, violin, viola da gamba, cello and harpsichord emanating from the stage in cavernous Gartner Auditorium sounded more like a fully produced studio recording than a live ensemble.

If their performance of Boismortier's elegant and aristocratic little chamber concerto was cautious and largely concerned with inner balances, their poise and alertness more than made up for any lack of risk-taking spontaneity.

On the list of chaconne-based compositions, Marais' obsessive "Sonnerie de St. Genevieve du Mont-de-Paris," better known Stateside as "The Bells of St. Genevieve," ranks second only to Pachelbel's ubiquitous Canon, and it has the added advantage of being the better piece. Violinist Elizabeth Blumenstock, gambist Whelden and harpsichordist Jung-Hae Kim played Marais' florid figurations with outstanding panache and crispness, though the softer voice of the Baroque violin (with gut strings instead of steel) kept some of Blumenstock's evident artistry from reaching distant corners of the hall.

Mellits' "Eleven Miniatures for Baroque Ensemble" was the sleeper of the evening, no doubt surprising many in the audience with its accessibility and wit. Seeming to draw influences from such disparate composers as Gyorgy Ligeti (in its mechanistic complexity), John Adams (in its similarity to post-minimalism) and David Schiff (in its imploding of genre-based expectations), Mellits' miniatures brought out the best in the ensemble, which played with liveliness and an impeccable sense of comic timing.

"Three Graces," written by American composer Yarnell in 1999 on commission from American Baroque, took counterpoint to an extreme, setting tonal lines against each other in the widest metrical freedom and creating a strange web in which themes and their variations seemed to coalesce rather than develop in a traditional way. Though not as compelling as Mellits' work, "Three Graces" (depicting women important in the composer's life) was played with conviction, and American Baroque's knack for actively listening to each other served them well in Yarnell's drifty score.

The curiosity of the evening was Whelden's "She's So Heavy," a Baroque pastiche based on the lumbering 10-bar bass line from the Lennon-McCartney song of the same name. While the treatment was ingenious, the work never set itself free from the glacial pace of the source material, and the result was less than compelling: a higher-quality sort of "Beatles Go Baroque."

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