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American Baroque: Marvelously Mixed Up

Those who insist that baroque music must be performed on instruments of the period have pure minds, bad ears and low musical horizons. The touchstone for performance art is the musicianship of the performer. But if modern instruments can deliver old music intact, can old instruments do the same for contemporary music?

American Baroque—a sextet that plays period instruments designed for old music—appeared at the Library of Congress Friday night with a mixed program of baroque and contemporary pieces. All were vividly characterized by musicians who have this music in their blood. Roy Whelden’s “She’s So Heavy” swipes a repeating bass line—a ground bass, in musical parlance—and a harmonic scheme from the Beatles tune, but it takes off cleverly in original directions.

Marc Mellits’s “11 Miniatures for Baroque Ensemble” paints indelible sonic pictures: “Slippery” slips and slides merrily; the nasty little configurations of “Carpal Tunnel” tighten what should be loose; the obsessive, whimsical smears of “Lunacy” bear lunatic anxiety.

But even lunacy is relative. “La Sonnerie de Ste. Genevieve du Mont,”

written about 300 years ago by Marin Marais, obsessively flogs a three-note sequence to the point of insanity and goes on ruthlessly from there. Violinist Elizabeth Blumenstock’s hair-trigger virtuosity was authoritative, gleefully demented, and mean as a hornet.

Two obscure baroque works, Boismortier’s Concerto Opera XXXVIIa, and Louis-Antoine Dornel’s “Sonata en quatuor,” danced gracefully in luminously transparent colors.

-Ronald Broun