

Baton is passed at Camerata

By David Weininger, Globe Correspondent | February 8, 2008

As Joel Cohen can tell you, the early-music scene looked quite different back in 1963 than it does today. That was the year Cohen first performed with a group called the Boston Camerata. "It was a wonderful group of people - friendly, humane," he says by phone from Paris. Musical standards, though, left something to be desired, and the operation was just a bit ramshackle. An example: Cohen was designated to play the lute, even though his training was on classical guitar, a different instrument.

"Three weeks later, I walked onstage with a lute. I'd hate to think what it sounded like," he says with a robust laugh.

Cohen became the Camerata's music director in 1968, and he will step down at the end of this season. In the 39 seasons of his tenure, he has transformed it from a semiprofessional group of enthusiasts into one of the pillars of Boston's crowded early-music community, known for Cohen's exceptionally creative, theme-driven programs. He has explored medieval tales, Shaker songs, and Christmas music of a variety of locales and eras. (The group's next concert, "Tristan & Iseult," will be performed next weekend.)

The group has also assumed an international profile, touring and recording regularly. Yet, under his vital direction, it has retained the spark of unpretentious delight that was, he says, the best aspect of the early-music ethos of the 1960s and early 1970s.

So why quit now? "Because I'm feeling great," he replies. "And I think a good time to stop is when you feel like you're on top of your game and have only good memories."

He also wants to devote more time to a new research project he's founded in France called Camerata Mediterranea. Its mission is to explore the common roots of the musical civilizations of southern Europe and the Middle East. It's music that has long fascinated Cohen, and some of it found its way onto Boston Camerata's most recent CD, "A Mediterranean Christmas."

Like Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project, the emphasis is on establishing common frameworks across cultural boundaries. "It's about getting American- and European-trained musicians to talk to their counterparts in the Middle East," Cohen explains. He talks of working with musicians from Morocco and Algeria "who will tell you that what they do is play medieval music from Spain. It's just that the medieval music from Spain isn't in European manuscripts.

"The European-trained scholars don't talk to these guys and these guys don't know anything about what a music department looks like in America," he continues. "How do we get things going so that there's actually an exchange of knowledge?"

The project comes at a time of sustained tension between Islamic and Western societies, and Cohen hopes that Camerata Mediterranea's activities can play a role in fostering mutual understanding.

"I can't solve political and economic problems - I'm not even interested in trying to solve them. All I know is that this is something that's crucial to our various civilizations - finding the junction points. It's exciting from an artistic point of view, and it's also useful to mankind at this point. I want to write one chapter of history a little differently than it's usually written."

Cohen will retain his ties to the Boston Camerata: He'll have the title of music director emeritus, directing one program per season. Yet he can look back at his time with a deep sense of satisfaction. "It's been a fabulous adventure. I can't tell you how lucky I've been to have one ensemble for all that time. Basically, every project I've desperately wanted to do I've been able to do."

The new music director will be soprano Anne Azéma, Cohen's wife and a longtime member of the Camerata. "I love the idea of it going to Anne because she's worked with me so closely for so many years - we know each other's musical thought. I'm thinking that at this point there'll be a change, but it'll be an evolutionary change. I think the performance values will continue, and she'll bring her own insights."

Azéma, who has directed several programs for the Camerata, stresses the rich legacy Cohen has bequeathed to the group.

"There are many paths that Joel has given us," she says, mentioning medieval music, Americana, and intercultural exploration. "We'll continue to follow those paths. But I have my own voice, and it should be expected that new programs will come about. Even if we go back to repertoire programs, they might change a little bit."

Or, as Cohen puts the same point, "We're adding another wing onto the cathedral. We're not tearing it down."

Romantic movements

For its annual Valentine's Day concert, the Boston Classical Orchestra has teamed up with the Borromeo String Quartet for an unusual program that mixes string orchestra music of Tchaikovsky and chamber works of Brahms. BCO music director Steven Lipsitt will join the quartet for the Andantino movement of the Brahms Clarinet Quintet. The second half of the concert will be Tchaikovsky's Serenade for Strings, for which the Borromeos will become the principals of the orchestra.

Sunday at Faneuil Hall; 617-423-3883, bostonclassicalorchestra.org ■

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