THE PLAIN DEALER/ SATURDAY, JUNE 4, 1994

ENTERTAINMENT

Ensemble offers new slant on Mozart

By Donald Rosenberg
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Mozart needs no campaigning from ardent supporters these days to convince us of his unparalleled compositional powers. Yet there are so many ways to hear Mozart that he's always welcome, lobbying or not.

Apollo's Fire, the Cleveland Baroque Orchestra, performed a joyous service in its Ohio Theater debut Thursday night by offering an energizing slant on Mozart. Its second-anniversary program was titled "An Evening with Emperor Josef II," which purported to shed light on Mozart's place in Vienna alongside the towering mediocrity of Antonio Salieri. What the concert actually succeeded in doing was to free Mozart of romantic or 20th century excess.

MUSIC REVIEW

Apollo's Fire

As led by music director Jeannette Sorrell, Apollo's Fire ended the program with a bracing account of the Symphony No. 41, "Jupiter," in the region's first performance on period instruments. It was something of a celestial experience to hear the work played by 26 musicians, rather than twice as many with most symphony orchestras, and to become absorbed anew in Mozart's inventive notions of structure, harmony, counterpoint and thematic design.

Sorrell's reading celebrated the unending marvels of the "Jupiter" with superb attention to detail, blend and phrasing. Unlike some early-music conductors, whose metronomic sense of tempo renders the classical repertoire numbing and breathless, Sorrell paced the symphony with a flexible hand. Her vitality was balanced by repose — the mellifluous quality of the slow movement emerged with special beauty — and her contact with the musicians resulted in ensemble playing of utmost finesse and inner pulse.

The orchestra, with guests filling out the instrumentation, was crisp in articulation and confident in attack. The woody mellowness of the bassoons was a pleasure, the natural horns and trumpets sounded vibrant and robust and the timpani — played by the Cleveland Orchestra's Tom Freer — claimed a welcome, even explosive, focus. The Apollo strings were lean, nimble and earthy.

Another example of distinguished Mozart artistry came in the program's first half with the Piano Concerto No. 14, K. 499, in which David Breitman played the solo part on fortepiano. The instrument initially comes across as somewhat veiled. But once the ear adjusts, the relationship between soloist and orchestra sounds fresh and unpressured. Breitman was a bold, sensitive protagonist, playing along like a chamber musician in the orchestral tuttis and asserting himself with elan in the solo material.

The fortepianist, a faculty member at Oberlin College and Case Western Reserve University, had the style firmly in his fingers. He shaped lines with an elastic touch, and his embellishments matched imagination with taste. A minor mishap in the last movement couldn't detract from the overall magic that was spun. Sorrell maintained exact control over the orchestral fabric, assuring close interplay and balance.

One could only feel sorry for Salieri in the face of all this Mozartean mastery. Sorrell and company opened with Salieri's Sinfonia in D major, a perfectly charming, eminently formulaic bit of classicism they played with clarity and zest. The theater's acoustics proved musician- and listener-friendly.

Helping to tie the evening together were Josef II and Salieri as enacted by Scott Plate, an engaging host and witty conversationalist. So what if we didn't find out much of substance about the unenlightened emperor and dutiful court composer. We learned that Apollo's Fire creates sparks when it turns on the classical heat.

First Classical gig. w/ Andrew Schwartz