

# Musicians revealed Vivaldi's subtleties brilliantly

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Antonio Vivaldi's music all sounds the same only if you're not listening very carefully.

Of course Vivaldi, among the most prolific of composers, wrote to Baroque formula, particularly ritornello and da capo.

But Vivaldi led the generation that established those forms. Within his handy formulas, Vivaldi found room to exercise an uncommon gift for melody, mimetic gesture, and for mischievous tinkering with the harmony he'd received from the previous generation of Italian masters.

This little rumination on Vivaldi was prompted by Saturday's all-Vivaldi program on the Early Music Now series. Recorder virtuosa Marion Verbruggen led an ensemble of Philharmonia Baroque principals: violinist Elizabeth Blumenstock, oboist Gonzalo Ruiz, bassoonist Danny Bond, cellist Phoebe Carrai and harpsichordist Charles Sherman.

They played Ruiz's reduction of the familiar "Spring" Concerto from the "Four Seasons" cycles, originally composed for small orchestra. Otherwise, they focused on Vivaldi's less familiar chamber concerti and one sonata for cello and continuo.

As the players (period specialists all, playing on historically correct instruments) made their way through eight selections, some for the full ensemble and some for various subsets, the subtle differences in mood and the witty plays against expectation became more and more apparent.

An opening ritornello form, for example, might be primarily a dance or primarily a virtuoso showpiece or it might be primarily about the charms of imitated bird song. Or it might be about boisterous humor, like the hee-haw braying in the ritornello figure of Concerto RV 101, which finds its way into the bass line beneath the virtuoso recorder flights between the iterations of the ritornello, and the raspberries trill that recurs so often in Concerto RV 95. Generally, closing movements are rollicking, dance-based dashes to the finish line. But in Concerto RV 84, Vivaldi trips it up with the sticky surface of weird, warped chromatic pauses.

Vivaldi wasn't one for writer's block or dark drama, at least in this music. Everything in this music points to a composer blessed with facility and interested in making listeners smile.

Saturday, these musicians gave Vivaldi just the light, brilliant, good-humored performances his music needs to come to full bloom. The lovely tunes seduced, the virtuosity impressed and the little jokes drew their smiles.

*This program took place at the Zelazo Center of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. E-mail Tom Strini at [tstrini@journal sentinel.com](mailto:tstrini@journal sentinel.com).*

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# Defining the Audience

## Classical Review

By Rick Walters



Who is the audience? It is the most often recurring thought I have as a critic. The place of classical music in culture is central to the pondering, but the question also boils down to local issues. As someone who attends more than most, it is endlessly interesting to ponder why and how our top Milwaukee professional performing groups attract different audiences. Is it venue? Marketing? Is it the musical literature programmed? The performances? Are the reasons social? Is the answer about a comfort zone of familiarity that formed years ago for reasons long forgotten?

For anyone only vaguely familiar with Early Music Now, a presenting organization of touring ensembles of pre-19th century music, I highly recommend investigation. The quality of the artists brought in has been almost infallibly top drawer, the programs interesting. EMN kicked off its 22nd season last Saturday night at the Zelazo Center at

UW-Milwaukee with recorder soloist Marion Verbruggen and five members of the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra of San Francisco.

The all Vivaldi program of seven concertos and a sonata featured evolved and lively style on period instruments. These musicians' attention to details in articulation, ornamentation, rhythm, clarity, phrasing and a buzzy "Baroque groove" gave the music urgency and polish. The mellow tone of the recorder, even in a player as good as Verbruggen, was sometimes overwhelmed by the ensemble, but that's the nature of the beast (and the reason the modern flute was invented). As vivid as it all was, I had had enough Vivaldi when it ended.

The night before I heard Milwaukee Choral Artists in a concert of Christian, Jewish and Buddhist sacred works. This accomplished women's ensemble, conducted by Sharon Hansen, would have been more persuasive in a room with more spacious ring than the sanctuary of First Unitarian Society. A premiere, "The Congregator Has Said" by Dutch composer Bernard van Beurden, was one of the most ambitious and dissonant of the 22 pieces performed. Unfortunately, there was too much sameness in most of the rest of the program, with too many slow-ish pieces that were pretty but forgettable.