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Ever More Baroque, Fairfield Ensemble Sharpens Its Focus

By VALERIE CRUICE

WHILE many large orchestras are suffocating under their own weight, a home-grown Connecticut ensemble has streamlined its image and is going big-time.

The American Classical Orchestra -- known for 18 years as the Fairfield Orchestra and Orchestra of the Old Fairfield Academy -- has announced a recapitulation of its primary theme: giving historically accurate performances on original instruments.

The orchestra will continue to be based in Fairfield County, and to offer its concert series in the Norwalk Concert Hall. (And in two years the ensemble hopes to be ensconced as well in a newly renovated 600-seat space at Carnegie Hall.)

Audiences should not expect Mahler or Tchaikovsky, or even Debussy. The concerts in Norwalk and at Carnegie Hall will be rich with Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Handel and Vivaldi; the programming might best be described as Baroque and Classical, with a toe in the Romantic era. The orchestra will range in size between 25 and 55 musicians. What reaches the ears is the aural equivalent of a fine aged brandy: warm, smooth and seamlessly blended.

The musicians are trained in historically precise techniques, and they render these on original or replicated instruments appropriate to the period of music they are playing. All the stringed instruments are made of wood and use natural gut strings, wood is the rule for the wind instruments, and the brass are valveless.

The sound of such an ensemble is "more homogeneous, more tangy and piquant," said Thomas Crawford, the conductor of the orchestra and its founder in 1981.

Over its history, the orchestra -- which began life in a church basement in Fairfield -- has managed to stay out of financial difficulty and in coveted performing spaces like those at Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center.

But why the name change? Even Madonna, who is famous for reinventing herself, has kept her name. The American Classical Orchestra's name, however, describes itself precisely: it plays classical music, it is composed of American musicians, and it is an orchestra rather than a chamber ensemble.

It takes more than a name change, however, to propel an orchestra out of Fairfield County and onto the national stage. Changes have already been made backstage; the board has been reorganized, and office systems, ticketing and personnel are being re-evaluated.

Artistically, instead of running the gamut from early period performance to premiering contemporary compositions, the orchestra will concentrate exclusively on music from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Finally, the organization intends to expand geographically, which means going on tour.

Mr. Crawford was asked why the change was occurring.

"We're the next generation of the early music movement," he said. "The level of scholarship and playing is much higher than in the early 1980's when there was a big early music movement." During that process, they restored thousands of stringed instruments, he said, adding that wind instruments are not restored, but copied.

Mr. Crawford continued: "There's a reason to do it now, because there are no other groups doing it. In several years there will probably be several such groups. With that base of music coverage in our region, then it will be necessary to reinvent again."

And, of course, a new century adds psychological distance and importance to things historic. In the 21st century, it might be asked, why should an orchestra be playing the great music of the 17th through 19th centuries in a 20th-century style on 20th-century instruments?

The American Classical Orchestra will perform on Saturday at 8 P.M. at the Norwalk Concert Hall. On May 8, the season finale will be given at 8 P.M. at the Norwalk Concert Hall. The number to call for program and ticket information is (203) 838-6995.

Photos: An interest in early music can be indulged at the Yale Collection of Musical Instruments where a 19th-century Italian bass horn, below, includes a serpent's head. Above, a French harpsichord made in 1770. At right, a tenor viol from 17th-century Germany. (Photographs by Thomas McDonald for The New York Times)