

Julianne Baird and Philomel Baroque

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Philomel Baroque Orchestra knows how to begin a concert shrewdly: With [Vivaldi's Concerto in G](#) ("alla rustica"), audiences in Philadelphia's Old City, Doylestown and Chestnut Hill over the weekend first heard [music](#) familiar and inviting but so slight - the piece runs seven minutes and probably took less time to compose - that everything from there sounds relatively grand.

Not that any program (I heard Friday's, at Old City's Christ Church) featuring the distinguished Rutgers-based soprano Julianne Baird wouldn't sound grand, especially with the famous Bach cantata *Ich habe genug* (usually sung by basses) as well as Handel's great aria, *Lascia ch'io pianga*. But any ensemble specializing in baroque music is obliged to showcase something unknown from this era when every European duchy had its own local Bach or Vivaldi - and to do so without creating unflattering comparisons.

This [concert](#) had the Hamburg-based Dietrich Becker (1685-1750)

contrived components that lent themselves to sequential repetition, contrapuntal harmonies, and other evidence of Germanic rigor. Typically, diverse elements are reconciled over the course of a movement, but, intriguingly, the tunes never lost the dirt under their fingernails while everything nearby remained learned and refined.

Is there much more where that came from? You can't be sure: Because Becker's better efforts outclass Vivaldi's lesser ones means pieces were widely (and profitably) misattributed. One of Friday's highlights was a *Concerto in B flat* for recorder that might be Handel's (nobody is certain) and could pass for it from a quality standpoint, especially with Philomel's Elissa Berardi, the concerto's soloist, phrasing with such a fusion of authority and joy. Though the group had tentative moments, they were few, unlike some past concerts.

Baird's portion of the program had music she's sung for years, but it wasn't a redundant experience. She is said to improvise her vocal decorations anew, and though I've made no scientific study as to whether that's 100- percent true, this is a vocal art that nobody practices with her level of mastery. Her ornaments aren't just elaborations on the music at hand, but are emotional elaborations on the text - they'd have to be with something as serious as Bach's *Ich habe genug*, in which death is the happy ending.

To that end, even her most impressive technical feats are accomplished with a lightness that stays in balance with the total musical package - melody, words, ornaments - that delivers a wider view of the composer, as opposed to a wider display to the performer's ego and ambition. Those who continue to insist that historically correct performance of baroque music closes more expressive doors than it opens simply

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