

Houston Philosophical Society Minutes of 625th Meeting, October 16th, 2008

Rice University
Cohen House

The meeting was called to order at 8:00 p.m. by President Patten with introductory remarks. First he expressed appreciation for the services of Dr. Newell Boyd, last year's president. He indicated that tonight's program was suggested by Dr. Bill Guest and indicated our gratitude for Mercury Baroque's presence and for their program to come.

He reminded members that the new website is now available. www.hps.rice.edu is the address and the password is Socrates. Shortly, after two years' work, we will be able to post the six sections to which members are now assigned. He asked that the lists be reviewed and invited members to inform their present section leader if they desired to change their assigned section. There are some 170 active members and we are now able to expand membership in all the sections.

The board intentionally reduced the cost of dinners to encourage the bringing of guests who might be appropriate members. At this meeting Dr. John Mendelssohn of the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center was admitted to membership.

In the absence of Vice President Evelyn Keyes, Patten asked that members submit suggestions to her for speakers and programs for the 2009-2010 year.

Following dinner various members introduced their guests.

Professor _____, chair of the voice and opera department of the Shepherd School Music, introduced the evening's program. The announced topic was A Baroque Battle: Italy versus France: a lecture and performance by Antoine Plante and the Mercury Baroque players. She indicated that nine years ago Antoine Plante, Jonathan Godfrey, and Ana Trevino-Godfrey decided that Houston needed a Baroque instrumental ensemble which became Mercury Baroque whom she believes to be a premier professional group in the nation. To accomplish this required money, business sense, and especially a quality product. This group has refused to become complacent in their artistry—largely because of their passion for their music. Their music is calming in times like these. The group has an outreach program to take their music to schools and other organizations.

Antoine Plante introduced his topic by identifying the two schools (Italian and French) who struggled for dominance. Baroque finds its origin in a Portuguese word meaning pearls that are not quite round and not quite perfect. He introduced a selection with extreme contrast of dynamic and then a beautiful line emerging with a return to the contrasts of the beginning. Tempo changes are a feature of the piece. Instruments of the ensemble are a viola da gamba, two violins, and a harpsichord.

The harpsichord belongs to St. Luke's United Methodist Church and the case is engraved with a riddle: Once I lived in the woods, and then was cut down with an axe, and now I make music. The violins and viola have gut strings which were common until the mid-twentieth century in symphony orchestras when they were replaced with steel strings. The strings contribute to the richness of Baroque music. Plante also discussed the difference between Baroque bows and contemporary ones. They are shaped more like the bow typically used by archers. The viol de gamba is similar to a cello but the player holds the instrument between his knees rather than resting it on the floor. The curve of the instrument case is unique and was a pattern for that used by more modern instruments. The viola bow is played underhand unlike violin bows.

The opera, a new music form, was very much a driving force in the Baroque Era beginning in the 15th century when instruments and singers both demonstrated great passion. Some of the musical literature takes melodies and moves them among the instruments with varying tempos and sounds in the canon form.

Georg Friedrich Handel wrote much of his music in the Baroque style. The andante movement from a Handel Sonata was played.

The French took a different approach based on their love of the dance. They created a style that differed rhythmically. Nine different dances were demonstrated by Concert Master Jonathan Godfrey with a few bars from each. Some of the dances were done by shepherds and included shepherd's pipes. The French were more elegant and class in their Baroque and less passion than the Italians. But in the conflict between the two the Italians emerged the winners. The Italians gave the names to tempos and to movements. The French did name to minuet movement of modern symphonies.

The program closed with the Passionate Sonata in the French style.

There were a few questions addressed to the ensemble having to do with their own feelings which playing as well as on how contemporary musicians decide on the tempos of four hundred year old music. Is it difficult for modern conductors to make the transition? Tempos for dances are established by dealing with the steps and the time necessary for them to be properly executed. Mean dictates tempo. Why did the instruments evolve into their modern form? Composers and instrument makers had much to do with this evolution by specifying the use of certain instruments to produce certain sounds.

Those present responded with great enthusiasm to the program participants.