

Thirteen Strings season starts with adventurous take on baroque standards

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13 Strings 40th season kickoff At Dominion-Chalmers Reviewed Friday night

Thirteen Strings Chamber Orchestra launched its 2015-16 calendar on Friday night with Handel's Water Music and Music for the Royal Fireworks. It was an appropriately celebratory program for the ensemble's 40th anniversary season.

Mayor Jim Watson was in attendance to declare Oct. 2, 2015, as Thirteen Strings Day in Ottawa. The announcement paved the way for an exceptionally buoyant and festive concert.

Director Kevin Mallon, who played violin with some of Europe's most pedigreed early-music ensembles, is in his element with this repertoire. Mallon is a meticulous student of the baroque, as well as a sensitive musician, and he brought his intelligence and scholarship to bear on a performance that cast Handel's comfortably familiar music in a bright and surprising new light.

Thirteen Strings performed all three of the Water Music Suites. Originally, Handel did not group his various movements in any particular order, and even today there are no hard and fast rules, although certain conventions have become the norm. Mallon exercised some adventurous choices in this area. For example, the famous Alla Hornpipe usually serves as a jaunty finale, but in this version the orchestra played it as the second movement of the D Major Suite.

Mallon's tempi choices were lively and energetic, but not extreme. This is, at its heart, dance music, less stylized and earthier than in Bach's orchestral suites. Handel is traditionally portrayed as stout and cross, but I've always



thought he must have been an excellent dancer, elegant and light on his feet. Mallon coaxes fleet, supple phrasing from the orchestra, with an irresistible sense of pulse, reminding you how ballet and courtly balls were never far from Handel's daily experience.

The usual orchestra was augmented by several guests, including the stylish Jonathan Wade on tympani, Montreal baroque specialist Francis Colpron on flute and recorder, and a shiny brace of horns and trumpets. Susan Morris's oboe solos were tender, langorous and tastefully ornamented. A tambourine and other percussion added a theatrical flourish to several movements.

The balance between strings and brass could have been more subtle, and there were a few minor missteps and stumbles from the musicians, but they did not deter from the overall enjoyment.

The evening ended with Handel's Music for the Royal Fireworks. The Overture sounded spectacularly kingly — a jubilant and auspicious kickoff to this anniversary year.