

The Boston Musical Intelligen

a virtual journal and essential blog of the classical music scene in greater Boston

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NEWS & FEATURES REVIEWS UPCOMING EVENTS

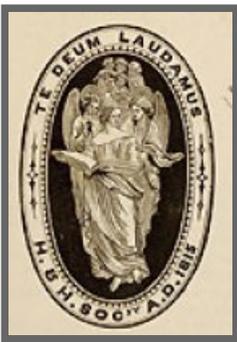
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MARCH 26, 2015

H+H Exhibits its Wares on Anniversary Day

by ELISA BIRDSEYE



It's in the air of Boston these days: the arts are finally achieving the prominence they deserve in civic life. This is particularly well exemplified by the appointment of Julie Burros to a cabinet level position in the Mayor's office and a strong commitment to the arts by Mayor Walsh. But it turns out that recognition of the value of the arts to the community has long been in the minds of proper Bostonians. On Tuesday we celebrated the 200th anniversary of the founding of the Handel & Haydn Society on the exact date. On March 24, 1815, six worthy Bostonian gentlemen met at the home of composer, educator, publisher and oboist Gottlieb Graupner to form what has become the oldest continuously operating arts organization in the country [unless one accepts the precedence of the 229-year-old Stoughton Chorale Society]. At the time of its founding, H+H was essentially a contemporary music ensemble of chorus and orchestra; Haydn was only five years

dead, and Beethoven's 9th Symphony was nine years off. Over the course of time, this organization has presented the US premieres of Handel's *Messiah* (1818), Haydn's *The Creation* (1819), Verdi's Requiem (1878), and Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* (1879). Additionally, they have performed at the state memorial services for Presidents John Adams and Thomas Jefferson (1826), Abraham Lincoln (1865), and Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1945). They have been on the cutting edge of the musical life of this country, and instead of resting on their lacy haunches, they remain one of the most vital and progressive of the many arts organizations in Boston. Their community outreach and education program is very strong, and their financial picture very solid, as evidenced by the remarks at the event. They have reached \$10 million of a \$12 million capital campaign to ensure continuing vibrancy.

Over the years they have morphed from a fairly large orchestra and very large volunteer chorus to a nimble band of 30 professional singers and correspondingly small orchestra, which since 1986 has comprised period instruments. The ensemble is now internationally recognized as one of the finest proponents of historically informed performances anywhere. While Baroque and Classical literature remains the backbone of their repertoire, they have occasionally ventured beyond these periods, and included dance and other art forms in their performances.

Tuesday evening marked the opening of an exhibition at the Boston Public Library of ephemera and other material entitled "The Handel & Haydn Society: Bringing Music to Life for 200 years". The festivities began with an opening reception in the Map Room Café of the BPL's McKim building. The Boston Public Library is another example of civic pride and the desire to make the best in the arts and education available to all citizens of the city (and the world). Founded in 1852, it is a youngster compared to H & H. It opened in 1895 and remains a "palace for the people". I would commend to your attention David McCullough's very interesting book "The Greater Journey: Americans in Paris", which details the many artists from the US (more than a few from Boston) who ended up in Paris in the mid 19th century. Many of them are represented in the architecture and art of the BPL palace, which stands not just as a monument to the best ideals and execution that were available during its construction, but it also, in its way, stand to commemorate the friendships built as these artists pursued their dreams. What a fitting setting for the exhibit we were about to see!

After nibbling on hors d'oeuvres and sipping the potent brandy punch (early patrons of H & H sometimes paid their



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James Doyle photo from opening night.

donations in barrels of brandy), Chairman Nicholas Gleysteen, Executive Director/CEO Marie-Helene Bernard, and Amy Anthony spoke of the history of the Society, its current standing in the world, and some plans for the future. One of the distinguished partners thanked was the Adams Arts

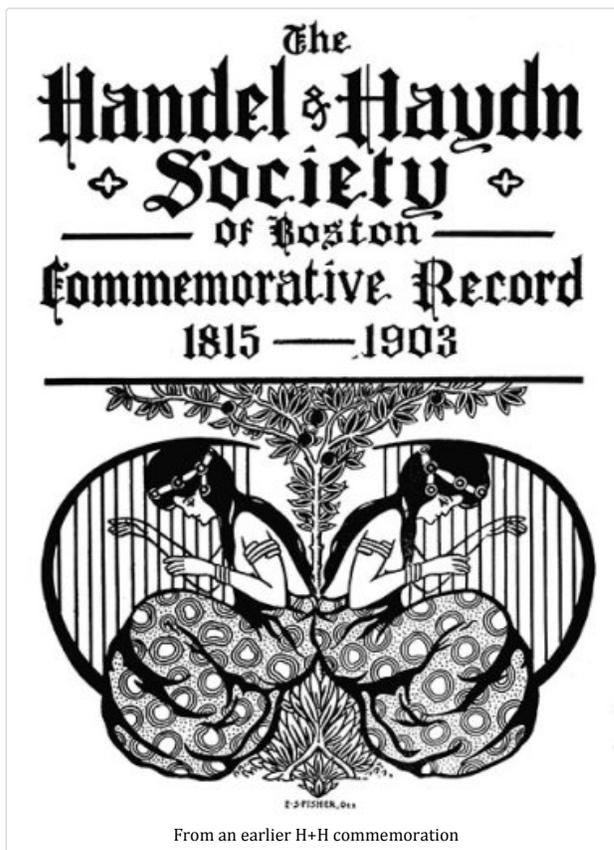
Raymond on Aucoin's
Crossing Premieres

Program, named in honor of John and Abigail Adams. John Adams famously wrote to his wife in 1780 that "I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain." The Adams family would surely be delighted that their descendants are able to enjoy music of such high quality in their honor.

Mention was made of the fact that it took until 1967 for women to be involved in the society, prompting a groan from the audience, though clearly they are front and center in the orchestra, chorus and management office now!

The crowd then migrated up to the third floor of the library to the Sargent Gallery, where John Singer Sargent's magnificent though controversial mural, *The Triumph of Religion*, was the backdrop to a beautiful performance by 8 members of the H & H Chorus. They sang "Surge, propera, amica mea" by Palestrina and "Ehre sei Gott in der Hohe" by Mendelssohn. The Palestrina sounded especially at home in the arched stone gallery, aurally not too different from a medieval church. The ribbon was cut, and people entered the Cheverus Room, where treasures from the archives of the Society along with material from the Boston Public Library's collections were on display.

The exhibit is extremely well-designed. There are 10-foot-high pictures of performers, programs from many performances, historic scores, along with some hands-on material including a modern and gut violin string side by side for touching and comparison. There are iPad (which had some kinks to work out) throughout the exhibit to provide various listening experiences (contrasting excerpts on modern and period instruments, a simulation of what *Messiah* may have sounded like in 1815), along with a beautiful silver cup inscribed to the chorus master who prepared the premiere of



Samson in 1845. My favorite was the display of tickets through the years, along with a notice of a train to New York being held to accommodate audience members of the Messiah. No matter what your knowledge level or age, there's something here for you.

The exhibit will be open during library hours until September 5. It is well worth a visit.

Elisa Birdseye, executive director of the Boston Chamber Ensemble, is an active freelance violist and principal violist of the New Bedford Symphony. Additionally, she has worked as the general manager of the New England Philharmonic and Boston Musica.

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