

Bach at Leipzig

Review by Dale Reynolds

When a show is a funny, fast-paced, superbly-acted farce, it might certainly be worth a gander. But when said show deals with history, baroque music and famous composers, all in a screamingly-funny production, then you *gotta* go see it.

Itamar Moses, still under 35, has written a marvelous comedy about six composers vying – amid backstabbing, lying and kidnapping – for the well-paid post of organist at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig, Saxony, in 1722. Constantly at war (or the threat thereof) with each other, these city-states (which didn't coalesce into modern Germany in the latter third of the 19th Century) supplied funds for their churches to hire composer/organist/ teachers. These men (always men) composed some fantastic religious music: these included Georg Phillip Telemann and Johan Sebastian Bach (and sons).

Moses' conceit – brilliantly executed by director Darin Anthony – is that in order to get this badly-needed job, these otherwise civilized men will do anything to each other. The fun is in watching what they do, how it works and how it backfires.

The irony of all this villainous fun is that JS Bach never shows up in the play, and Telemann has no lines. But the seven actors mark their characters so individually that even with the running gag of three having the same first name of Johan and four with the same first name of Georg (they distinguish among themselves by the use of their middle names), they are all distinguishable from each other, period-costumed and -bewigged as they are. Rob Nagle, in the lead as J.F. Fasch, brings a wealth of reality to his farcical role (as everyone must) and is believable throughout. Joel Polis, Dominic Conti, Henry Clarke, Bill Brochtrup and Michael Cavanaugh are equal to Mr. Nagle, making the director's work all the more plausible.

The costume- (and presumably wig-) designer, A. Jeffrey Schoenberg, has created some gorgeous outfits for the men to wear. Every little detail appears to be authentic and the men work well in them, including the one at the end who is clothed in practically nothing.

Please believe me that I laughed so loudly and so hard that I was gasping for breath before it was over. And so might you.

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Review by MR Hunter

It's the classical version of *American Idol*—Leipzig-style. Set in 1722, the illustrious position as Germany's music director and organist has an untimely opening, and the competition heats up as they try to outwit, outlast and outplay each other for the appointment.

Emerging, young playwright, Itamar Moses, plays on an interesting theme, but its lack of maturity comes across as playing "Chopsticks" with only two fingers. There are seven composers of various repute—four are named Georg, the other three Johann, (a play on the namesake of famous composers), rivaling for the coveted position, but only one can prove worthy to fill the seat and that's when the powdered wigs and coat tails start flying. Using every tactic possible, nothing short of blackmail, secret alliances, deception, and even a bit of poisoning can stop them from besting their opponents of the post. Unlike, other period pieces of this time, (Peter Schaffer's "Amadeus" springs to mind), Moses takes the otherwise serious world of classical music, and turns the busts right over on their heads. Unfortunately, it's not always with sidesplitting results.

Moses counterpoints between slapstick and intellectualism, making more noise than laughs often trampled by Darin Anthony's breathless direction. The cornball humor simply falls flat, and the highbrow self-consciousness pertaining to the age-old debate of art and its form and content is far too sharply wedged between the farcical scenes. Moses has yet to learn to trust the audience, relying on Three Stooges like routines to set up the punch line that is too incredulous for even this solid ensemble to pull off.

The first act is belabored by officious monologues, complex interpersonal relationships, shallow characterization—there is the innovator, the conformist, the indigent thief, the effeminate Casanova, the senile, the self-doubter, and the silent frontrunner, "But he has a lovely speaking voice," the famed Telemann. The relentless scheming of these characters becomes a confusing, discordant plot of artifice. Moses does find a better balance in the second act, as the twists and turns, and elaborate setups produce some kneejerk guffaws.

The final scenes, however, reveal Moses' as a rising talent in theatre, and make the juvenile, ham-handed situational comedy almost tolerable. His juxtaposition of the six composers speaking over the organ demonstrates Bach's famous "Crab Canon" a fugue from *Musical Offering* consisting of six parts (two voices are considered extraordinary) is spectacularly spine tingling. Although, Bach is never onstage, his presence is undeniably felt throughout the show, a superb technique skillfully handled by Moses. The final scene, 28

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years later in 1750, brings the innovator, Johann Friedrich Fasch (Rob Nagle) and the conformist, Georg Balthasar Schott (Joel Polis) together once again at the doors of Thomaskirche to listen as Bach plays. It is, and always after all about the music, the genius of one man, and their deepest appreciation. History, as always must repeat itself, as the organ groans. In the heart and mind of Schott, however, Bach continues to play, his music drowning out the cries that he is dead.

Those familiar with the Pulitzer Prize winning "GodelEscherBach" will no doubt feel confident that Moses did his homework. Indeed, much in terms of mathematical theory and music seems heavily relied on from this philosophical text as well as some biographical information on Bach.

More choreographed, than staged, Darin Anthony's loose direction lacks focus much of the time as the actors wander willy-nilly across the stage without much intention. Fight choreographer Bill Madden produces a wonderful fight sequence in the second act that is both polished and entertaining.

Set design by Kurt Boetcher is clever, especially the jail cell, and produces a heightened sense of somber ambiance and largess with the great double door entrance. Sound designer Phillip White hits every single sound gag and note with perfect pitch and timing. A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's resplendent, ornate costumes are lovely and a feast for the eyes.

The ensemble is a director's dream cast with Nagle at the helm. Brochtrup offers additional physical comedy with his rubber-like arms and his unbelievable flexibility. Clarke is mesmerizing, both clothed and otherwise, Conti gives a likable quality to his mantra chanting Georg, and Crooke practically steals the show with his sweet, grandfatherly innocence and charm. Joel Polis possesses his role as stoic preserver of music with feeling veracity.

If Simon Cowell had been in Leipzig during this time, he would have applauded these fierce competitors and told them, "This is what classical music is about." Healthy competition inspires greatness, and Moses has set the bar very high for himself and other playwrights to follow.