

Great Lakes festival says goodbye to its artistic director and hello to Bach

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Pianist and festival artistic director James Tocco and cellist and artistic director designate Paul Watkins were to perform together at the 2014 Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival. Tocco, the festival's artistic director since its founding in 1994, will retire after this year's festival and will be succeeded by Watkins. / Michelle Andonian/Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

By Mark Stryker

Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

Three out of Four stars

Saturday, Seligman Performing Arts Center, Beverly Hills

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The 21st annual Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival came to a close this weekend in the same fashion as it often has over the past two decades — with the Detroit-born artistic director James Tocco at the piano for a big-finish finale on the last Saturday night of the two-week festival.

The climax was a sparkling, well-proportioned performance of Bach's "Brandenburg Concerto No. 5," with Tocco's lucid piano blending seamlessly with co-soloists David Buck on flute and Kim Kennedy on violin and the Detroit Chamber Winds and Strings. But there was also something bittersweet about the performance since it represented Tocco's last concert as the artistic director of the festival that he founded in 1994.

Tocco is stepping down — though he will surely return to perform at future festivals — because at 70 he feels he's not as in touch with younger composers and musicians as he needs to be, and because issues relating to

his hearing and eyesight have made it difficult for him to consistently meet the high standards of performance that he's established for himself throughout his career.

What has Tocco meant to the festival? Pretty much everything. Without overlooking the key role that executive director Maury Okun has played in forging an infrastructure and the board members and funders who have provided the means to make it happen, Tocco has built the festival from scratch into one of Detroit's signature cultural events and one of the most artistically rewarding festivals of its kind in the country.

One of the keys to Tocco's programming is its sense of adventure. By championing a smart marriage of contemporary music, standard repertoire, off-the-beaten track works and thematic ideas, each festival becomes a journey in which individual concerts add up to something more substantial than simply beautiful music played beautifully. The 2014 festival, for instance, traced the long shadow of Johann Sebastian Bach. Over the last two weeks audiences heard Bach's influence refracted through a myriad of prisms — the counterpoint of Beethoven's String Quartet No. 13, the humor of P.D.Q. Bach (courtesy of this year's resident composer Peter Schickele), and the meditative emotional qualities of Philip Glass in a sublime solo recital by pianist Frederic Chiu, who played a program of his own devising that alternated Bach's Partita No. 2 with Glass' "Metamorphosis."

On another front, Tocco's personal warmth, generous spirit and Detroit roots have infused the festival with a strong sense of family. It's not just that he's been able to attract A-list artists to perform, but he has created the conditions in which they can function at their best — by no means a slam dunk. Paul Watkins, the Welsh-born cellist and newest member of the Emerson String Quartet, is succeeding Tocco as artistic director, and his reputation and skills have the potential to elevate the festival to an even higher plane of invention. But Watkins would be the first to admit that he'll be standing on Tocco's shoulders.

Saturday's ambitious concert was in many ways a quintessential Tocco invention. It brought together not only three of Bach's "Brandenburg Concertos" but also three contemporary reflections of Bach — a work for solo trombone by the Swiss composer Kurt Sturzenegger, a string trio by American Joel Hoffman and a collaboration with Eisenhower Dance in Bach's Third Brandenburg.

The best thing about Laurie Eisenhower's choreography for her six dancers was the way in which the joyously athletic and balletic movements underscored the exuberant feeling of dance that's so fundamental in Bach. The dancers moved from ensemble into solo roles in much the same way as a Bach melodic line, though I wished Eisenhower had explored the ideas of counterpoint and fugue more thoroughly; a passage in which the dancers weaved in and out of a chain was a promising seed that seemed discarded too quickly.

The 11 members of Detroit Chamber Winds and Strings played without a conductor (but with harpsichord) and brought a springy rhythmic gait to the accompaniment behind the dancers and on their own in the "Brandenburg Concerto No. 4." The musicians downplayed their collective vibrato without eliminating it entirely, producing a transparent blend and a pleasing warmth. Still, I wondered if a conductor might have created more contrasts in dynamics and articulation. In the Fourth concerto, which opened the concert, the flute soloists David Buck and Jung-Wan Kang and violin soloist Yoonshin Song made a charismatic front-line.

Hoffman's "Self-Portrait with JS" for violin, viola and cello offered a fun-house mirror reflection of Bach's Sonata in G Major for Viola da Gamba. In the opening movement, for example, Hoffman subtracted notes from Bach's original, creating a concentrated, pointillist effect that suggested the distilled modernist gestures of Anton Webern — except Hoffman's score always remained tonal. The second movement found the trio interrupting Bach's music with sudden long held notes that suspended time in frozen animation. These kinds of games can sound gimmicky, but here they were charming.

Finally, Sturzenegger's "B.A.C.H. Fantaisie" for trombone was a fascinating work in which the four-note motif that spells out Bach's name in German musical nomenclature (B-flat-A-C-B natural) underwent endless transformation. Even though the trombone can only play a single melodic line, the phrasing and rhythm gave the impression of counterpoint – not unlike a Bach piece for solo violin or cello. Sturzenegger is a trombonist himself so the writing sounded idiomatic to the instrument, and soloist Ken Thompkins' virtuoso performance was strikingly clean and expressive. I'd like to think that Bach himself would have been delighted by both the composer and the performer.

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