

Interview | Henry Lebedinsky

Guest Conductor with Seattle Baroque Orchestra – Music and Medicine

Guest conductor Henry Lebedinsky leads the Seattle Baroque Orchestra on a journey into the world of early modern medicine.

EMS: What is this concert about?

HL: This program explores the intersections between illness, wellness, and culture in the 18th century. Medicine was still very much influenced by medieval thinking back then. We begin with an overture called *Hypochondria* by Dresden-based Czech composer Jan Dismas Zelenka. Hypochondria didn't mean the same thing that it means today. Back then, it was considered a physical condition, resulting in moodiness, mood swings, and a generally sensitive temperament. It was considered a sign of a sensitive personality. The music illustrates that.

Durante's Concerto 'La Pazzia' (madness) depicts mental illness with the intensity of text painting found in Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*. Durante was able to capture so many states of mind - mania, obsession, despair, and melancholy – using the colors of the orchestra. It's an amazing piece.

Arcangelo Corelli wrote a wonderful violin sonata called *La Follia*, which was much more than just another variation set on the popular Spanish 17th century tune. His student, Francesco Geminiani, arranged it as a concerto grosso, which uses a small group of strings as a solo group within the larger orchestra. The piece dives into madness, obsessing over and over the same idea. It's not about showcasing virtuosity, but a perseveration on an *idée fixe*. You won't be able to get it out of your head.

The second half of the program dives into treatments and cures, with the cure often being worse than the disease. Marc-Antoine Charpentier's suite for Molière's play *Le Malade imaginaire* (The Hypochondriac) was the last collaboration between the famous playwright and one of France's most gifted composers. The play pokes fun at both the doctors and the patient, with hefty doses of satire and slapstick, and the music is wonderful.

One of the most graphic explorations of 18th century medical practice was French composer Marin Marais' *Tableau of a Gallbladder Operation*, with the taking you on a guided tour of a surgical procedure. And, of course, being a baroque orchestra, we will perform the operation using original instruments.

We'll close the program with the Seattle premiere of an orchestral suite by Swedish composer Johan Helmich Roman, most likely written for the opening of the Stockholm's Danviken hospital and asylum in the mid 1720s. It's ceremonial music, but the suite closes with a lovely pastoral lullaby. Roman has a wonderful and unique compositional style, and I enjoy programming Scandinavian baroque music whenever I can.

EMS: Why would anyone want to attend this concert?

HL: I have no idea. That's up to you. Why would anyone want to attend any concert? Today, just as when this music was first written, people crave experiences that will feed their souls. We're offering music that many people will have never heard before. It may be 300 years old, but it's still NEW MUSIC, performed by great musicians who are passionate about their art. It has plenty of power to entertain, inspire, and enrich, if you'll give it a chance. My job is to offer a context to help you understand the *why* behind it all. The music will speak for itself.

And now a few questions from the famous interviewer Proust. The Proust Questionnaire has its origins in a parlor game popularized (though not devised) by Marcel Proust, the French essayist and novelist, who believed that, in answering these questions, an individual reveals his or her true nature.

EMS: What's your idea of perfect happiness?

HL: Perfect happiness – (Laughs) it doesn't exist, we aren't perfect. But I am lucky enough to be married to a

person that make me ridiculously happy, I live in a beautiful part of the country, and share my art for a living. That's enough for me, and I realize that so many people don't have any of those opportunities. So I try to bring them a little happiness with my music as much as I can. That makes me happy, too.

EMS: What is your greatest fear?

HL: Where America seems to be going. I was a refugee, coming to America from the Soviet Union as a child, and I don't like the punitive attitude with which our leaders are governing. It's very Soviet.

EMS: Who are heroes in real life?

HL: People that fight/give it up for the cause. People who are unafraid to stand up to an unjust system rigged for the gain of a few at the expense of the many.

EMS: What is your most treasured possession?

HL: I try not to have too many things, but that can be difficult when you're in the harpsichord business (he laughs). I have a serious obsession with musical scores. Those notes on the page, I look at them and I can hear them all. Every time I get depressed about the things our species does to our world, the music gives me hope.

EMS: What is your motto?

HL: Try to make the world a better place than how you found it. And let's have a drink.