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Clarinet proves to be time traveler

Stuart Low
Staff writer

(November 8, 2006) — Not everyone can choose to live in the past. But whenever Charles Neidich plans a concert, he must decide which century his clarinet will inhabit.

On Friday, the Manhattan soloist performs chamber music by Mozart, Brahms and Rebecca Clarke in a Mendon church. While he enjoys using 18th century-style instruments to play Mozart, this time he'll bring a 20th-century clarinet.

"Classical clarinets are played at a lower pitch," says Neidich, 53, who taught at the Eastman School of Music in the late '80s. "So they raise questions about tuning at concerts like this. We'd need to replace the piano with a fortepiano and use other classical instruments."

Playing on antique models brings definite advantages, especially authentic tone color. But Neidich also exploits his familiarity with these relics when he uses more neutral-sounding modern clarinets.

"I'm informed by what I learned from old instruments," he says. "I can try different types of phrasing and coloring."

Visitors to Friday's concert will hear him in three distinct styles: classical (Mozart's "*Kegelestatt*" Trio), Romantic (Brahms' *Clarinet Trio*) and modern (Clarke's *Prelude, Allegro and Pastorale* for clarinet and viola).

Neidich belongs to a small group of celebrity clarinetists who perform with orchestras around the world. Only Richard Stoltzman and Sabine Meyer can claim comparable numbers of engagements and recordings. But Neidich likes to point out that the concert clarinetist is not a recent phenomenon. (If he seems steeped in clarinet lore, it may be because his wife, Ayako, is also a player.)

Already in Mozart's time, Viennese virtuoso Anton Stadler was winning raves for his expressive tone and technical daring. The 19th century saw Heinrich Baermann and Richard Muhlfeld champion the clarinet music of Weber and Brahms. And in the mid-20th century, Benny Goodman commissioned masters such as Copland and Bartok to compose challenging concertos for his instrument.

Friday's concert will show Neidich in the more intimate ambience of chamber music. He'll be joined by pianist Aaron Wunsch, cellist Amy Sue Barston and violist Edward Klorman.

"I haven't played in Rochester since Eastman," says Neidich. "It'll be exciting."

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