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IN: REVIEWS

Devotional Songs To Sing at Home

by CHRISTOPHER HODGES

Sweet music transfixed some sightseers last Saturday, when, whilst shuffling about Newbury Street, they happened into the Church of the Covenant and discovered “The Spirit Transformed: Women and 17th-Century Sacred Songs.” Laury Gutiérrez, director of La Donna Musicale, whose mission is to showcase music that formed an integral part of women’s lives in the early modern period, collaborated with Catherine Gordon of Providence College, whose research inspired the lecture-concert focusing on 17th-century French *airs sérieux*, a type of devotional song intended for women to sing at home. Gordon spoke about the origin, development, and characteristics of the airs while the ensemble performed varied examples from this diverse and fascinating genre.

The *airs sérieux* emerged as a devotional tool for laypeople to practice their faith in private. The first *airs* consisted of texts sung to pre-existing secular tunes. Early texts, written by male Catholic reformers, express a theologically rich faith steeped in mysticism, reminiscent of writings associated with mystics like St. Teresa. These parodies (or *contrafacta*) fell out of favor by the middle of the century as authors published *airs* with newly composed melodies that underscored the emotion of the pieces. Simpler melodies made the *airs* ideal pedagogical tools, teaching women both how to sing and what to believe. Gordon demonstrated how music became more refined throughout the century as the texts simplified from complex discussions of theology to simple love songs that repeated Catholic truisms. The genre (and the program) culminated with the *Cantiques spirituels*, cantatas made from a set of *airs* similar to a song cycle.

The concert began with secular French songs and their sacred *contrafacta*. Miguel Cabrera, the ensemble’s jaunty tenor and sole male member, enlivened the secular songs *Contre mon gré* and *J’ayme bien* by acting out their debauched nature. Accompanied by Na’ama Lion and Laury Gutiérrez on flute and baroque guitar respectively, he roamed the sanctuary with a pitcher and hand over his heart singing of the joys and sorrows of ladies and drink. Sopranos Janet Stone and Shannon Canavin in turn repeated those songs, replacing the lewd texts with an erotic description of the ecstasy of St. Teresa. The cognitive dissonance between the sexualized text and their pious delivery highlighted a certain humor inherent in the French *airs*. The show

progressed likewise, with Cabrera singing a secular song and Stone or Canavin replying with its beatified version. The varied accompaniment to the *airs* featured interesting combinations of violin and organ, organ and two gambas, and even flute and plucked gamba.

Cabrera filled the room with a natural timbre, bringing levity to the prevailing austerity in the secular music and a joyous restraint to the *Cantiques spirituels*. Sopranos Janet Stone and Shannon Canavin complimented each other very well. Stone sings with a light, graceful voice that has strong projection. Her effortless sprezzatura and ornamentation contributed greatly to an effective delivery of Bertrand de Bacilly's *Ah! Qu'un Pecheur*, an unmeasured vocal prelude where the notes are composed but the rhythm is up to the discretion of the singer. Canavin has a melodious tone and an easy, unencumbered disposition. Her fluidity in French allowed for effortless delivery of text, notably in her marvelous rendition of François Berthod's *Jesu les tourmens & les coups*. While none of the singers had difficulty filling the space, the cavernous nave of the Church of the Covenant limited intimacy we expected from this housemusic.

In Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre's lively Trio Sonata in D Major, the only purely instrumental work we heard, Na'ama Lion (flute) and Cynthia Mathiesen (violin) maintained close communication throughout. The instrumentalists laid into the startling cadence at the end of the first movement which caused many to stir in their seats as the progression arrives on a simple d major chord only after sliding through g minor, e major, and d minor harmonies. The third movement's fugal fireworks began when Laury Gutiérrez (viola da gamba) tore through Jacquet de la Guerre's 16th-note ridden subject in an unexpected gamba solo. Lion and Mathiesen shaped their battling answers with the same vocal-like sensitivity to phrase exhibited in the *airs*, resulting in a glorious finale and warm applause. Vivian Montgomery unified the ensemble, both in this sonata and throughout the afternoon, with brilliant harpsichord and organ accompaniment. She paid careful attention to the singers' breaths and phrases while her full block-chord accompaniment projected the harpsichord's rich sound into the large room.

A musicology PhD student at Boston University, Christopher Hodges earned a M.M. in organ performance with Peter Sykes.