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IN: REVIEWS

## La Donna Musicale's Passion and Virtuosity

by LIANE CURTIS

The Society for Historically Informed Performance (SoHIP) is celebrating its twenty-fifth season of summer concerts of early music. This week's concert (the fifth of the six-week series) on July 26 at St. Peter's Church in Weston features a program by La Donna Musicale, approaching its own twentieth anniversary. Director Laury Gutiérrez has been the continuing force and vision over these years. The personnel for this concert are three "old timers": Gutiérrez (viola da gamba), Laura Gulley (violin) and Daniela Tošic (mezzo-soprano); and three new to the ensemble: Margaret Angelini (harpsichord), Shari Alise Wilson (soprano), and Adele Ohki (violin).

The concert (repeating on July 27 in Andover and July 28 at Emmanuel Church, Boston) is offering women composers (the specialty of the ensemble) from Italy in the seventeenth and very early eighteenth centuries, in a range of styles, emotions, and levels of intensity. There was also a range of level of familiarity. While all of this music was unknown twenty-five years ago, now Barbara Strozzi and Chiara Maria Cozzalani, while perhaps not household names, are frequently performed, studied and recorded, and La Donna Musicale has played an influential part in bringing about this change. On the other hand, new discoveries and frontiers continue to be explored: a world premiere of a sprightly duet aria by Camilla de Rossi (fl. 1707-1710) was included, and Gutiérrez promises more music by the Rossi in the future (and more information as well; almost nothing is known about her).

The music, both sacred and secular, featured an emphasis on the sensual. The cloistered life of the nuns, as Gutiérrez suggested in her lively comments, meant that their feelings — of love, sensuality and ecstasy — were channeled into religious devotion via musical expression. Cozzalani's *O quam bonum* is over the top in this expression of rapture, almost pornographic in its fetishization of Christ's wounds and the Virgin Mary's breasts and milk, conveyed musically through panting exchanges and relentless, driving ostinati. Tošic and Wilson conveyed the white hot heat with vocal intensity, and the ensemble was adept and flexible in the pushes and pulls of tempi.

In *Vulnerasti cor meum*, by Alba Tressina, Tošic was sultry and evocative. Occasionally in the duets she had a weak entrance, understandable given that sometimes she had the

tessitura of a soprano and others a contralto. Gutiérrez took the second vocal line with great sensitivity in Tressina's *In nomine Jesu*, responding in the exchanges and harmonizing with fluidity.

St. Peter's Church was a spacious and comfortable venue, resonant and with good sight lines. The traffic outside wasn't as much of a problem as I had feared, just occasionally during quiet moments. For instance, the final, silenced cadence of Strozzi's "I baci" – "bacia e taci!" – "kiss me and fall silent" (or more colloquially, "kiss me and shut up!"), was overpowered by passing traffic.

A solo motet by one Rosa Giacina Badella (*O serena pupille*) was given as a violin solo by Laura Gulley (with Angelini and Gutiérrez as the responsive, flexible continuo, as they were throughout the program). Giving the florid virtuosity of some of the middle sections, it worked perfectly as an instrumental work, and Gulley approached slower declamation with real vocal sensitivity. Gulley's tone has a rich warmth, and she has the grace of a dancer – I love to watch her play as well as hear her. As she matures her sense of ease and elegance has ripened and deepened.

Violinist Adele Ohki had the lead in Rossi's *Sinfonia con eco* (and Gulley was the echo). Ohki's sound was bright, even edgy, but she was adept and full of sensitive nuance in the charged interplay with Gulley.

A powerful aria from Rossi's Oratorio *Santa Beatrice d'Este* concluded the program; it is Handelian in its scope, with a vigorous A section, and a more pensive, solemn B section (with interjections from the A material by the violins), and an impressively ornamented return. Wilson was a sure-footed soprano, agile, crystalline, perfect in diction and emphasis, and with the bearing of an imperious Queen. Here was music of such grandeur that it ought to be heard in Symphony Hall!

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