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IN: NEWS & FEATURES

## *The Prodigal Son* by a Woman Composer

by LIANE CURTIS

La Donna Musicale, the Baroque ensemble that is devoted to recovering music by women, will present the oratorio *The Prodigal Son* by Camilla de Rossi on March 17 at Lindsey Chapel of Emmanuel Church in Boston, and on March 18 at the Radcliffe Institute Gymnasium, Cambridge. I went to the read-through of the piece by the ensemble last week and was so struck by this music that I asked Director Laury Gutiérrez to discuss it. Her comments follow. Up until 2009, we [La Donna Musicale] worked on rediscovering chamber music by women. But while at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard, I was able to research and begin work on large-scale pieces by women composers, first operas by Francesca Caccini and Maria Teresa Angesi, and now oratorios. I am always looking for works that have not been recorded, and with Camilla de Rossi, three of her four oratorios have been recorded, so I picked the one that has not been recorded, or even performed, *The Prodigal Son*. It can be considered a large-scale work, but it is very manageable because of the forces required: five singers, string ensemble and continuo; and the piece is not so long, not like Handel's *Messiah*.

I am excited because this is the first time we will actually perform a complete large-scale work by one of these unknown composers that I have been researching. We have been doing extended excerpts of operas, but this time we will perform the entire piece.

Oh, yes, Camilla de Rossi's a wonderful composer. I knew that from studying the manuscript, I've been editing the score from months; but to hear it come alive in the rehearsal,... she is really SO good. She really knows how to write a melody that conveys the affect, the emotions of the text. And the pacing is good, the action moves very fast, with not a lot of recitative. The arias are in the best Baroque style; you will think of Handel, Bach, and Vivaldi.

The arias are traditional ABA form, plus there are instrumental *ritornelli*, where the instruments round off the arias, with some material of the aria. But she doesn't always do that. It's varied. These singers — Julianne Baird is so renowned — all the musicians, really, but especially these singers, are expert in their ornamentation. You might think with Da Capo form, that you get bored, when you hear the A part again. But these

singers are extraordinary in their ornamentation; they'll just knock your socks off! And Rossi gets so much variety out of the small string ensemble; each aria has its distinct character.

The writing is very compelling; de Rossi really understands the characters. They are not just black and white; they are portrayed with nuance, with humor and contradiction. There's the impulsiveness of the Prodigal Son, to abandon everything for his liberty — our Prodigal Son, countertenor Gerrod Pagenkopf, does a fantastic job — but then when he gets his freedom you feel that it is already somehow bittersweet.

Rossi is able to convey that complexity of the relationships, I wonder if she, like Gerrod and I are, was the youngest in her family, that she has such a personal empathy with this character. All are drawn so strongly! The role of the brother is a male soprano role, but we decided to have him sung by a woman, and this soprano, Kimberly Moller, thinks the opera should be called “Fratello: the Brother of The Prodigal Son” because she feels *her* arias are so important! Already, within our crew, we have some tension. [laughs] Julianne Baird, a soprano, sings the role of the mother. It is such a privilege to work with her. And Pablo Bustos is the father. I love working with these singers.

At the Women's Studies Research Center, Brandeis, where I'm in residence, it's been a very good place to think about the possibility that de Rossi may have been related to the Jewish composer, Salomone Rossi. We don't know anything about her life. At first I didn't understand the Prodigal Son story. I didn't think it was fair for this kid to get it all. But a Jewish writer told me that the parable portrays a Jewish family. The family unit is so central in the Jewish faith that when the son leaves, the family is broken. So when he comes back, they are not just forgiving him to be nice to him; his return makes the family *whole* again. That is more important than anything else. Of course that concept transfers to other families and other traditions. It's universal.

One thing we do know about her: Camilla de Rossi was commissioned to write her oratorios by the Imperial chapel in Vienna, and they were performed there between 1707 and 1710. On the manuscripts, she is called “Romana” — “from Rome,” perhaps? It also says that she wrote the text, the libretto, but there is another setting of the Prodigal Son from that time, by Carlo Cesarini, and it appears that he set the same libretto. Only his manuscript says the text is by Benedetto Pamphili. So, it's not clear. She set other texts by Pamphili; he was such an influential cultural figure in Rome, with connections to Handel and Alessandro Scarlatti. They are the context for her music.

Handel is in Rome in 1708. I have this hunch that their paths crossed; when you hear this music, you can't avoid thinking of that. That's an important part of putting this in context, hearing it and thinking of where it fits in stylistically.

At speaking of the Jewish family, there is a unique scene at the very end: to celebrate the return of the son, the mother calls for the Musician to sing a song. That character has just this one aria, but it is very special, and it's one of the longest arias, about five minutes. The music, to me, has a hint of Sephardic flavor. I chose Daniela Tošić for that. She's perfect for this role. We might not ever find out if Camilla was Jewish, but here is this aria, where the musician is called for, there is this lively rhythm that hasn't been used in the entire work, plus some melodic intervals that are a little exotic. So I have a surprise for the audience, we are going to do something fun that concert-goers aren't used to.

I don't want to give it away.

[La Donna Musicale](#) has information about the venues and tickets, and also offers audio of four complete arias from another of Rossi's oratorios, which the ensemble performed last year.

*See related review [HERE](#).*

**Liane Curtis (Ph.D., Musicology) is Resident Scholar at the Women's Studies Research Center, Brandeis University. Her website is [here](#).**