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La Donna Musicale: Erudite, Spirited *Prodigal Son*

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In a perfect world, Camilla de Rossi's gender would be a footnote to her music. On the other hand, de Rossi's unique role as a female composer writing in a male-dominated setting opens her work up to the erudite, spirited advocacy of *La Donna Musicale*. Dedicated to the "discovery, preservation and promotion of sacred and secular music by women composers," the period instrument ensemble gave de Rossi's *The Prodigal Son* a triumphant modern premier last night at Emmanuel Church's Lindsey Chapel. It repeats today (18th) at 3:00 pm at Radcliffe Institute Gymnasium, Harvard University.

Any man or woman would be proud to have penned this work. First performed at the Imperial Chapel of Vienna, De Rossi's 1709 oratorio tells the Biblical parable of a son's rebellion, repentance, and return to the family hearth. De Rossi's brisk pacing keeps recitatives short but effective. Instead of a rigid separation between aria and recitative, de Rossi allows a more continuous flow, which soprano Julianne Baird likened to Scarlatti's oratorios. The arias portray each affect powerfully and elegantly, while giving singers room to shine.

Baird portrayed the heartbroken mother with a resonance that almost overwhelmed the tight acoustics of Lindsey Chapel. Her resplendent tone occasionally elided some lyrics yet still served musically convincing ends, such as her ornaments describing the rewards of loyalty in "Bella Gloria!," or her offering a beacon to an ungrateful son in "Senti! Se Il Tuo Rigore..." ("Listen! If Your Severity...")

As the dismissive but ultimately dutiful Son, countertenor Gerrod Pagenkopf sounded best in his upper register, for example the shapely coloratura of "Augelletto Di Tenere Piume" ("A Little Bird With Delicate Feathers"). Yet Pagenkopf displayed shaky dips into the lower register, bordering on a hooting falsetto (for example the uneven octaves of "Tempo! Non Dispiegar," ("Time! Don't Unfold")), with his voice achieving more balance in the second act. Pagenkopf's dramatic instincts were unshakeable throughout: his celebratory aria "Quanto è Mai Cara La Libertà" ("How Dear is Freedom!") captured a young man's underlying doubt at newfound freedom (reinforced by a minor key and gloomy bass line), while the recitative "Doppo lungo vagar" ("After wandering far") was enhanced by his emotive, natural delivery. All of the singers offered clarity and credibility in recitatives, portraying a stylized yet emotional familial dispute rather than filler between arias.

Though originally written for male soprano, in this performance, female soprano Kimberly Moller's bright, focused voice flawlessly executed the decorous music of the titular character's brother. "L'Usignuolo Che V` Cantando" ("The Nightingale Singing") and the tempestuous "Tuona Il Cielo" ("The Sky Thunders") were well served by her sure pitch and pinpoint articulation, though the young soprano could afford to add more personal weight to the text. Her passionately sculpted line endings on "Tu Sei Quella Navicella" ("You Are That Little Ship") revealed a welcome warmth alongside the formidable technique. Tenor Pablo Bustos was given fewer pyrotechnics but more emotional demands as the stern but loving Father. Bustos remained completely believable throughout, from reserved lecturing at the beginning of the work, through an imploring "Il Consiglio Io T'Offro" ("I Offer You Guidance") to the blend of consolation and explosive release in "Lascia, O Figlio, Il Tuo Dolore" ("Oh Son, Leave Your Grief"). Bustos's sweet yet masculine voice and clear diction only heightened these gut-wrenching parts.

De Rossi's novel formal touches for both voices and instruments eliminated the staid Baroque conventions found in even the most well known composers' works. Several duets broke up the standard recitative-aria scheme, with "Ti Ricordi, Amico Rio" ("Do You Recall, Friendly Stream") starting out as a moving parental lament between Baird and Bustos, before Moller joined Baird for the middle section. Mezzo Daniela Tomic played a Musician singing a joyous country dance towards the end of the work, though the decision to turn this aria into an audience sing-along allowed only a brief encounter with her smoky, laidback voice.

Just five strings offered several orchestral effects, mostly given to director Laury Guti rrez's viola da gamba, whose rich, grainy sound meshed well with Bustos for "Per Salire Ad Erto Monte" ("To Ascend A Steep Mountain"), while adding an evocatively bitter tone to "Povero Core!" ("Poor Heart!"). De Rossi also included surprises, such as a rapid-fire viola accompaniment in "Veltri Ardit" ("Bold Greyhounds"), a duet for voice and violin (stunningly played by Asako Takeuchi) on "Tu Sei Quella Navicella" and concertante violins for the Handelian "Del Mio Fallo Assai Minore" ("An Error Much Less Than My Own"). The small body of strings with organ and harpsichord (alternating for even greater textural variety) provided firm, invigorating support throughout, with a transparent French overture to kick off this incredible concert.

Readers may glean much interesting information from Liane Curtis's *BMI* article on [*The Prodigal Son*](#).

This program will be repeated on Sunday, March 18 at 3:00 pm at Radcliffe Institute Gymnasium, Harvard University. Tickets are available for purchase online [here](#).

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