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IN: NEWS & FEATURES

Agnesi's "Sophonisba" in first Modern Performance

by LIANE CURTIS

Maria Teresa Agnesi, an eighteenth-century child prodigy in Milan, attracted the interest of noble patrons, including another Maria Theresa, Empress of the Holy Roman Empire. In 1748, Agnesi wrote an opera that premiered in Vienna, and it was reported that the Empress herself enjoyed singing queen Sophonisba's arias in the privacy of her chambers. The Empress was moved by this dramatic story of a woman in high places, trying to be true to her own desires, feelings, and integrity.

250 years after its first performance, *Sophonisba* will receive its modern première next weekend on March 25 at Gordon Chapel in Old South Church, Copley Square, at 7 pm (and on March 26 at First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church in Arlington, also at 7 pm). The concert performance by the distinguished Boston-based ensemble [La Donna Musicale](#) will offer highlights and key dramatic moments of the powerful *opera seria*.

The story is based on Roman history during the Punic wars: Queen Sophonisba (of Carthage) has been compelled to marry for political reasons, but then when her true love Massinissa is victorious in battle, she is then able to be joined with him. But vengeance and power struggles ensue. It features striking virtuoso arias, with the cast of four singers. [Renée Rapiér](#), contralto, the heroic Queen, won the most recent Metropolitan Opera Regional Competition. [Robert Crowe](#), male soprano, plays the Queen's true love, Massinissa, torn between the demands of war and politics and his own feelings. Crowe was the first male soprano to be a National Winner of the Metropolitan Opera Competition, and the *New York Times* has praised his "staggering gifts" as a singer.

The four singers are accompanied by an ensemble of strings, winds and continuo, but the focus is on the remarkable coloratura singing, powerful both in its technical and expressive demands on the singers. In listening to clips from last fall's opera, *Ulisse*, Renée Rapiér impressed with her luscious contralto, rich with both sensuality and layers of profound emotion. And in other recordings of Robert Crowe, I could feel the palpable electricity he generated in the pyrotechnics of the virtuosic style. Rounding out the cast are Pablo Bustos, tenor, and Mary Gerbi, mezzo-soprano.

Laury Gutiérrez, founder and director of La Donna Musicale, that for nearly twenty years has discovered, recovered and performed early music by women composers,

explained recently that its repertoire has changed. “In the 1990s and early 2000s, we had our focus on the seventeenth century. We performed nun composers [like Cozzolani], we recorded Barbara Strozzi, and Antonia Bembo, then Julie Pinel – 18th century but still early.”

“When I received the fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute in 2008-2009, it was a turning point. We got more recognition, earned after touring in Europe, performing in South America, touring in the U.S., and after our three CDs, and we turned to bigger works – opera, the highest exponent of what a composer can do. ... We dived into the first one, Agnesi’s *Ulisse in Campania*, working with Julianne Baird – she is such an expert, and we realize that her music is really excellent.”

Gutiérrez pointed out that Robert Kendrick, professor of Music at University of Chicago, thinks *Sophonisba* is Agnesi’s best work. “So I go for it!” she said. “We want to understand her style, we want to know more than one piece, to know her use of the language. There is a new biography of her, and it came with a CD, but not of her vocal music, which is a pity, because the vocal music is much more adventurous and outstanding. So we take it upon ourselves to solve this problem.”

Gutiérrez continued, “Julianne Baird, the soprano who was featured in *Ulisse*, said, in a recent radio interview, that her work with us is the most interesting work she is doing, because we are unearthing this good music. She’s not in this concert, since the soprano is the male soprano, the warrior role, but Julianne will be with us again in the future. And we have these important scholars who we collaborate with, Robert Kendrick and Rebecca Messbarger.

Messbarger wrote of a century of women: women in eighteenth-century Italian public discourse, which, Gutierrez said, “Opens my eyes, it is so well written. We usually don’t think of Italy as important for the Enlightenment, but that’s one of her first issues, and also that there were all these women, doing so many things. That gives me a context, to look into the Italian composers, and Agnesi, who wrote seven theatrical works of music – it was an era when opera was really the pinnacle of music composition.”

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