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Music of Renaissance women reborn at Radcliffe

Wielding a viola da gamba almost as tall as she, Laury Gutiérrez plays with the assurance and animation of a rock star. She is, after all, one in a select club of artists who hold a National Interest Waiver from the U.S. government, granted to noncitizens “who because of their exceptional ability in the sciences, arts, or business will substantially benefit the national economy, cultural, or educational interests or welfare of the United States.”

Gutiérrez is a native of Venezuela, but during Monday’s (March 2) lecture in Radcliffe Gymnasium titled “From Manuscripts to Performance: The Prolific and Passionate Women Composers of Italy (1568–c.1768),” she made clear her musical interest lies in Italy. Acclaimed musician and a fellow this year at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, the raven-haired Gutiérrez has travelled the world in a hunt for elusive manuscripts by female composers.

Gutiérrez not only found precious musical evidence of otherwise forgotten female composers, she — along with her early music group La Donna Musicale — is among the first to play these treasured compositions for centuries. The lecture was punctuated with arias and operatic performances that have never before been heard by contemporary audiences.

The general perception is that few women composed music before the 20th century, Gutiérrez explained, and if they did, the compositions were not deemed worth preserving or re-creating.

“This paradigm needs to be changed,” she asserted.

With the assistance of tenors Michael Barrett and Pablo Bustos and soprano Sherezade Panthaki, Gutiérrez exhibited the music of Madalena Casulana, a 16th century composer whose madrigals were the first by a woman to be printed. Casulana’s music is characterized by its ability to move and flow.

Holding up Casulana’s published dedication, which had been transcribed from Italian into English, Gutiérrez said, “It’s really a lot of fun to read.” And revealing too — it’s a glimpse into the inner workings of a woman whose compositions will go on to be obscured — though they arrive centuries later — by famous male composers: Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, et al. Nevertheless, Gutiérrez says, “[Casulana] realizes that she is a musician. She’s a professional musician.” In the 1568 dedication, Casulana showed herself well-aware of her place in the world: “[I want] to show the world … the vain error of men, who think themselves so

much the masters of the high gifts of the intellect, that it seems to them that these cannot be shared in the same way by women."

"But I think we should play more than talk," declared Gutiérrez, who segued into a piece widely considered to be the first opera ever composed by a woman. That woman was Francesca Caccini, daughter of composer Guilio Caccini, and the year was 1625.

Gutiérrez also talked about viola da gambist Barbara Strozzi, whose adoptive father was able to provide resources and performance opportunities for her music. These benefits included music lessons with the well-known opera composer Francesco Cavalli. Strozzi published eight books of music during her lifetime. As if a testament to the time period these women contended with, the only portrait of Strozzi that Gutiérrez could find was of the musician with her instrument at her side — and one breast inexplicably exposed.

Gutiérrez drew laughs when describing the premise of Cavalli's opera "Ercole Amante," which 17th century female composer Antonia Bembo took and reworked in her own style.

"The text is burning [with] love," Gutiérrez said. "[Hyllo and Iole] are in love with each other and [Hyllo's] father is in love with [Iole] — but the father had killed her father."

Bembo's rendition — performed to perfection by Gutiérrez's sight-reading singers — was sweeping, romantic, and grand, while Cavalli's (also performed by the musicians) was, in contrast, much more staid.

The keen differences seen between Bembo and Cavalli make up one piece of evidence to help understand the mysteries surrounding women composers of the time — their likes and dislikes, their particular styles — and unfortunately most of this knowledge has been lost over time. That is, until Gutiérrez came along.

"Thanks to this wonderful opportunity I have with Radcliffe I was able to go to Prague and find a piece that has never been performed," she said of a work by composer Anna Bon.

Gutiérrez found "by chance" many pieces marked "Bon," leading her to question the material's origin, if they were Anna's or another composer of the time with the same last name and a similar style.

"It is very common that men take women's compositions away, or they are given the name of men," Gutiérrez explained. "But it's not very usual the other way around."

Gutiérrez pays tribute to Bon and these other lost icons and to her fellow musicians today by working with female musicians whenever possible.

“It’s my commitment to women,” she said.
And with that, Gutiérrez again plucks her viola da gamba, transporting the audience hundreds of years back to these women who never would’ve guessed their compositions, or their lives, would ever come to light.