

The musical women

By Geraldine Freedman
Oct 14, 2010

La Donna Musicale is all about woman power: a group of female musicians who play music that women have composed.

“We’re trying to make a statement,” said Laury Gutierrez, the viola da gambist and founder of the group. “Women can compose, they can play. Come enjoy.”

La Donna will perform Sunday afternoon at Emma Willard School’s Kiggins Hall as part of the Friends of Chamber Music series with music by Maddalena Lombardini, Anna Bon and Maria Teresa Agnesi.

If these composers sound unfamiliar, that’s because La Donna’s mission is not to perform music of living composers, although it occasionally does. Rather, the group’s focus is women composers of the Renaissance to the Classical era, and especially 18th century Italy, whose music is unknown today.

La Donna Musicale

WHERE: Kiggins Hall, Emma Willard School, 285 Pawling Ave., Troy

WHEN: Sunday 4 p.m.

HOW MUCH: \$25, \$15

MORE INFO: 273-8135, www.ladm.org

La Donna Musicale (“the musical woman” in Italian) performs on period instruments. And except where a male soprano is called for, only women sing the parts. On Sunday, the players will include violinists Laura Gulley and Sarah Darling, violist Jane Starkman, violone player Janet Haas, fortepianist Ruth McKay, contralto Renee Rapier and Gutierrez.

Exciting possibility

Gutierrez got the idea to found the group in 1992 after she attended a Women’s History Month concert at Indiana University and saw no music on the program that women had written.

“I found that interesting, upsetting and exciting,” she said. “I thought it could be a niche.”

Having pursued a degree in solo performance and historical performance practice at Indiana, she knew it would take much research to find the names of women composers and their music. She also knew that although some modern publications had been made of their music, much of it was now out of print and many were filled with errors. So it was necessary to find the original score.

Fortunately, other music historians have made catalogs of composers’ names from these earlier centuries, so Gutierrez had some names to start with. She started at Harvard University’s library, then traveled to libraries in Paris and Prague and found success.

Rare manuscripts

“In Paris at the Bibliotheque Nationale, you wear white gloves and get to touch this one book in which the composer wrote,” she said. “Sometimes, the music is on microfilm

and the library will give you a copy or can provide you with a PDF file. In Prague, some of the pieces were only in manuscript and they allowed me to take a picture.”

Gutierrez found music by such names as Bianca Maria Meda, Chiara Margarita Cozzolani, Barbara Strozzi (a Venetian courtesan) and Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre. She also found music by Lombardini (1745–1815), Bon (1738–after 1770) and Agnesi (1720–1795), some of which La Donna will perform on Sunday. Even more exciting was to find background information on these women.

“In Prague, I found the contracts that Anna Bon’s father had with the Esterhazy court where he was a painter and scene designer,” she said. “Anna had studied at the Ospedale della Pieta where Vivaldi had taught. So I went there and found her birth certificate. She’d been born in Bologna.”

La Donna will perform three of Bon’s works: two instrumental pieces and a vocal aria. The group also recorded an all-Bon disc this year, which will be for sale at the concert.

Gutierrez discovered that Agnesi’s music, most of which is still in manuscript, was dedicated to Maria Theresia, the Holy Roman empress and sovereign of Lombardy, who was said to enjoy singing.

“Agnesi was an excellent composer and this is very good music,” she said. “I can’t believe there is only one European CD recorded in the last 10 years with one of her arias and one harpsichord piece. She wrote five operas.”

La Donna will perform “Ulisse in Campania,” which is more a serenata (a dramatic cantata) than an opera.

“The music is very powerful with the dynamic and rhythmic force of Vivaldi,” Gutierrez said. “It has the elegance of melody of Mozart or Haydn and a looking forward to the classical period. She was a transition composer.”

La Donna loves her music so much that its next disc will be devoted to Agnesi’s music, she said.

Less is known about Lombardini, other than she made a living as a touring violinist and sometimes sang professionally in operas. Her music is very rhythmic and mostly written for violin — some of which has made it into contemporary editions, Gutierrez said. La Donna will perform one of her violin duets.

Why is so little known about these women?

Changing attitudes

Gutierrez said she thought part of that stemmed from the attitudes prevalent in the 19th century when the expectations of how women were supposed to behave altered from that of previous centuries.

“In 17th century Italy, women composers produced as much as women composers today,” she said. “Parents then believed a musical talent was good for girls to have either for marriage or the convent. They needed a dowry. If you could compose, for instance, a fee to enter the convent was waived and it was a sure bet a girl would be accepted.”

By the 18th century and the Enlightenment, women were even getting paid for their compositional efforts, she said. And some women, such as Lombardini, actually made a living as a performer. Others, such as Agnesi, benefited from the progressive attitudes

espoused by the Austrian Lombardy particularly at the courts in Vienna and Dresden. But by the 19th century, all this changed, Gutierrez said.

“Women were brainwashed into thinking that only men, like Mozart, could do music,” she said. “They had no voice in the public sphere.”

Some women prevailed, such as Clara Schumann and Rebecca Clarke. Yet even today, only some of Schumann’s work is performed in comparison to her more famous husband, Robert, although many more women composers currently writing are finding a forum, she said.

Still, attitudes negative to women composers persist, Gutierrez said. When La Donna first started performing, people didn’t show too much interest in hearing an all-woman composed concert.

“That’s why we became busy recording and we make a point to hire women,” she said.

The Sunday concert is also a bit of a homecoming for fortepianist McKay, who graduated from Emma Willard in 1980. She credits the school’s philosophy that she was expected to do what she put her mind to with helping her to follow her dream to be a professional musician.

“I began piano lessons at the school and attended concerts as a student at Kiggins Hall. Now I’m a harpsichordist — one of a dime a dozen in Boston,” McKay said with a laugh.

To date, La Donna Musicale has gathered more than 1,000 works penned by more than 17 women composers. Of the more than 100 pieces it has performed, La Donna will eventually make them available in modern editions.