

October 27, 2012

IN: REVIEWS

Two Sopranos—Male & Female: Early Works by Women

by **LIANE CURTIS**

La Donna Musicale continued uncovering and celebrating the music of historic women composers in its concert last night at First Congregational Church in Cambridge. The music spanned the early 17th to mid-18th -centuries, offering varied styles and a wide range of emotional qualities.

Two gorgeous soprano voices — one male, one female — were showcased. Robert Crowe's voice was powerful and impressive in its range of color as well as pitch spectrum. A seasoned performer, he was the first male soprano to be a National Winner of the Metropolitan Opera Competition. In the first set, Crowe's vocal athleticism was featured in arias by Camilla de Rossi. While we have no biographical information about Rossi, the oratorios that were commissioned from her by the Viennese Imperial court ca. 1707-1712, remind me of G. F. Handel's music from the same time. "L'Usingnuolo" (The Nightingale) was a pure delight, as Crowe warbled and trilled amazing birdsong cadenzas. "Tuona il Cielo" (the Sky Thunders) contrasted with a vigorous, agitated style, full of powerful leaps, in which Crowe was completely commanding.

As he explained in an informative lecture-recital at Brandeis University's Women's Studies Research Center (where La Donna's director Laury Gutiérrez is in residence) on Thursday, he is a natural male soprano — his voice simply never changed. So he is not a falsettist. While the natural male soprano is a rarity (although it might be less rare in a culture that encouraged men to explore that capacity of their voices), the 17th and 18th-century music repertoire abounds with works written for castrati, the male sopranos and countertenors of their day.

The instrumental "Allegro" from the Rossi's Oratorio, *The Prodigal Son*, struck me with its pensive opening, followed by its rich imitative textures. This piece and others could have a life of their own as instrumental Sinfonia, apart from their connection to larger vocal works. Violinists Laura Gulley and Joy Grimes played with great poise and drive.

Camila Parias (soprano), a recent graduate of Longy, was the soloist in the next set, composed in the early 17th-century by Lucrezia Orsina Vizzana. As Director Laury Gutiérrez observed, despite being a cloistered nun, Vizzana was able to keep up with the

newest musical styles. So the sensitive, spontaneous style of the earliest operas is employed in this sorrowful prayer, with crunches of dissonance adding a layer of anguish. The crystalline clarity of Camila Parias's singing was perfect in its agility and emotion. The ensemble was focused and tight, moving with the fluidity of the style.

Crowe and Parias were paired in a sacred madrigal by Maria Nascinbeni from the late 17th century. Their contrasting timbres were an intriguing combination, like gold and silver wound together in one precious sonorous effect, including both intertwining lines, imitative exchanges and separate solo passages, giving opportunity for virtuosic flourishes.

Gutiérrez's commentaries were lively, but still it would have been nice to have had program notes (we could use something to read during the tuning...). Gutiérrez mentioned the Italian convents that were homes to Vizzani and (presumably) Nascinbeni but a little context of about Maria Antonia Walpurgis and even about Vivaldi's opera "Bajazet" would have been useful. "Bajazet" was a pastiche that Vivaldi compiled in 1735, and the aria "Sposa son disprezzata" was actually composed by one Geminiano Giacomelli. Well, whoever. It's a beautiful thing, beginning with the violin's stark descending arpeggios serving as an emblem of despair, full of understated intensity as played by Laura Gulley. Crowe provided expressive singing with dramatic crescendos and decrescendos on long held notes, which, when the section repeated were then given an amazing range of ornamentation. Cecilia Bartoli has made this aria a hit on Youtube (spreading the Vivaldi attribution), but I far preferred La Donna's version (and I am not some early music purist, just FYI).

These fiddlers are all so graceful, and someday someone will choreograph Laura Gulley as *prima ballerina* in an early music performance akin to this one [[here](#)] of Debussy's *Afternoon of a Faun*. Gulley and Jane Starkman (also violin) were graceful and full of both energy and nuance in Vivaldi's "La Follia" (although I am not a fan of pieces based on repetitive patterns). While this church is very beautiful, in general, it seemed too resonant, and perhaps that accounted for the occasional muddiness of ensemble.

A majestic scena from 1760 by the noble woman Maria Antonia Walpurgis provided a stately conclusion. Crowe and Parias provided intensity that was impressive and dignified, with an agitated contrasting section, and then a recall that provided more flourishes and grandeur.

La Donna Musicale, and Laury Gutiérrez (leading from the viola da gamba), have built up a devoted following over the years, and they completely deserved the enthusiastic response they received.

Audiences will have another chance to hear the concert on [Oct. 28](#).

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