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Group shares lost works by lady composers

By Cathalena E. Burch Arizona Daily Star

The names are not familiar: Chiara Margarita Cozzolani, Barbara Strozzi, Antonia Bembo, Julie Pinel, Bianca Maria Meda, Caterina Assandra, Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre and Madalena Casulana.

They are female composers dating to the Baroque era. Their works would have been forever forgotten by history if not for the tireless efforts of La Donna Musicale and its founder, Laury Gutiérrez.

"People don't know that women actually not only composed but were very, very prolific in the 17th century," Gutiérrez said recently during a phone call from her office at Harvard-Radcliffe, where she has a research fellowship. "All that music has become dormant. There are very good treasures that we've been able to unearth. We took a composer, Antonia Bembo, and we recorded a CD. The music is good and it's worth listening to."

Tucson will get its first taste of these female composers' works when La Donna Musicale opens the Arizona Early Music Society's 2008-09 season on Sunday. The performance is one of only a handful the Boston-based ensemble performs around the globe to expose listeners to works that have been historically ignored.

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Gutiérrez's journey began in 1992, while the Venezuela native was pursuing her master's degree at Indiana University. She formed La Donna Musicale and set about to find and perform — on period instruments according to historical guidelines — long-lost works by Renaissance, Baroque, Classical and contemporary female composers.

It has not been an easy journey. She has had to travel the globe to view rare manuscripts kept by archivists in Paris, Prague and Italy. She also has relied on equally dedicated musicologists who have in recent years begun taking a closer look at women who composed just as much music as their male counterparts.

La Donna is an early-music ensemble that performs on period instruments. Its goal is to expose listeners to the works in their original contexts. But while it strives to maintain the historical accuracy, the group also is mindful that its overall mission is to entertain.

"Our role is challenging," Gutiérrez conceded. "Just because a woman composed a piece doesn't make it relevant. We have to find the piece that is relevant in our 21st-century world. We look for pieces that will be interesting and balance a program. You can't have all intellectual pieces or happy pieces. You have to have balance with a composer."

Gutiérrez came to the United States in the early 1990s to pursue research on female composers at Indiana University. When she arrived here, she said, she was given a national-interest waiver that acknowledged the specialty and import of her work. A few years later, she got her U.S. citizenship.

You get a sense from speaking with her that her life is consumed by her vocation. She is quick to praise the female composers she has championed — Italian Antonia Bembo and Parisian Julie Pinel are close to her heart. But she is just as quick to note that not all the music she has unearthed in her journey is relevant or even good.

"Is all the music good? No. No, by all means," she said. "These people were not composing to transcend time. They were composing for the time. We have to weed out a lot of music."

But much of it, she added, "is as good as any other composer. I don't feel necessarily that you will hear gender differences in an aria written by a woman composer or one written by a male composer.

"The bottom line of the music, if it moves you, then it is good. If the emotions are activated, then the music is worth it. It just happens it is written by women, and there is a lot of it and we are happy to unearth it."

In its first year, La Donna performed three concerts employing scores Gutiérrez had discovered. The response was so enthusiastic that the group, which numbers as few as six for its live shows and as many as 14 for its recordings, was invited in 1993 to the prestigious Boston Early Music Festival. That engagement led the group to set up its home base in Boston.

"For all these years, nobody touched that music," Gutiérrez said. "I realized this music is there, and nobody is looking at it. There is a lot of distraction in our life, so when you focus on something you really dig in. One of the things that we wanted to do is dig into these composers."

The group has recorded three CDs and hopes to do many others, including DVD projects, Gutiérrez said. The group's recordings have been universally praised; Spanish-based Goldberg Early Music magazine last fall gave La Donna's latest CD, "The Pleasures of Love and Libation: Airs by Julie Pinel and Other Parisian Women," a five-star gold rating — the magazine's highest and rarest honor. "Everything about this latest release from American ensemble La Donna Musicale is first-rate," the magazine gushed.

"Nobody else in the United States, no other ensemble, got that kind of review, an award of five stars," Gutiérrez said. "That, to me, is validation. This music is good."

If you go

La Donna Musicale

- Presented by: Arizona Early Music Society.
- When: 3 p.m. Sunday.
- Where: St. Philip's in the Hills Episcopal Church, 4440 N. Campbell Ave., at North River Road.
- Tickets: \$20 general, \$17 seniors, \$5 students.
- Program: Pinel's "Rossignols vous chantez." Pinel's "Porquoy le berger qui m'engage." Pinel's "Bocages frais." Jacquet de la Guerre's Violin Sonata II in D major Pinel's "Echos indiscrets, taisez vous." Herault's "Bergères, voulez vous m'en croire." Pinel's "Scène Pastorale." Jacquet de la Guerre's Trio Sonata in D major. Bembo's "Psalm VI: Domine in furore tuo arguas me." Anonymous, "Aux plus heureux Amants."
- Soundbites: Visit www.ladm.org to hear samples from the ensemble's CDs.