

La Donna Musicale gives women their due

By COLIN EATOCK

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Even in the rarified world of Early Music, the music that La Donna Musicale performs is pretty rarified.

The Boston ensemble opens Houston Early Music's fall season Sunday with *Passionate Enemies*, a program of female composers in Prussia and Austria in the 18th century.

It's not likely that many people today know that Wilhelmine, the sister of Prussia's Frederic the Great, was a gifted composer. The names of the other composers on Sunday's program - Anna Bon, [Camilla de Rossi](#) and Maria Teresa Agnesi - aren't exactly household names, either. Indeed, many classical music fans would probably have a hard time naming a single female composer before 1800.

But for La Donna Musicale's music director, gambist [Laury Gutiérrez](#), the music of female composers active in the baroque era has been a passion for 20 years. Her ensemble - which varies in size from about six to eight musicians, depending on the repertoire - has played more than 100 concerts in the U.S., Europe and South America. (Sunday's concert will mark the group's second appearance in Houston.)

"Women not only composed, but they composed well," Gutiérrez says. "And I believe we have proved this with our concerts and CDs."

It all started when the Venezuelan-born musician was a graduate student at [Indiana University](#) in Bloomington in the early 1990s. Even though IU is a major center for the study of Early Music, she noticed no female composers were in the curriculum. The quest for music written by women became a consuming passion, and in 1992 she founded La Donna Musicale - one of the

few ensembles in the world devoted to the performance of music penned by women.

Gutiérrez says although baroque female composers are largely forgotten today, in their time they were sometimes prominent artists. They worked in larger forms such as opera and oratorio, they received honors from the crowned heads of Europe, and some even became wealthy from their music.

But where does Gutiérrez find this music today? It's not like you can buy it at the local music shop - and [Amazon](#) and [eBay](#) aren't much help, either.

During the past two decades, her search for centuries-old musical manuscripts has taken her to libraries and archives as far away as Paris and Prague. But, as she tells it, the real work begins once she finds what she's looking for.

"The research to find the music is relatively easy," she explains, "compared to the decisions you have to make when you play the music. It's very challenging to make music from the original sources. You want to do something that's like what people would have heard when this music was written but that also makes sense to modern ears."

A high priority for Gutiérrez is preserving her work on recordings. La Donna Musicale has produced four CDs so far, of sacred and secular music from the 17th and 18th centuries - all by female composers. She also hopes to publish some of the musical scores she's found in libraries and archives so other performers will have ready access to them.

Her efforts on behalf of forgotten female composers have won encouraging support of both Harvard and Brandeis universities. But it's through La Donna Musicale's live performances that Gutiérrez is most encouraged.

"People come to our concerts all the time and say, 'I didn't know that women composed music in the past. I'm so pleased by what you're doing.'"

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