

# The Boston Musical Intelligencer

*a virtual journal and essential blog of the classical music scene in greater Boston*

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APRIL 11, 2016

## Revelations Archival and Modern

(by Liane Curtis)



[La Donna Musicale](#) gave a recently discovered work by the Viennese nun Maria Anna von Racshenau (ca. 1650-1714) its first hearing over 300 years in a Friday program pairing Raschenau's music with Camilla de Rossi's (fl. 1700-1710); rediscovered several decades ago, her work remains too little known. Their contrasting works were full of exquisite musical moments, resulting in a rich and satisfying event.

A sprightly "Sinfonia con eco" by Rossi, served as an overture for the evening. Guan-Tin Ku and Joy Grimes were the "dueling violinists" with their virtuosic (and colorfully ornamented) echo exchanges. The echo effect was accentuated by having Ku hidden among the pews, but I would have preferred to have her in view, perhaps even amidst the audience. She is too charismatic a performer to hide away! In general, United Parish in Brookline (near Coolidge Corner) was a suitable venue, with good resonance and acoustics. However, the chilly temperature surely accounted for some of the intonation issues amongst the instrumentalists.

In a fascinating pre-concert presentation, musicologist Janet K. Page (from the University of Memphis, TN) explained the origins of the work by Maria Anna von Racshenau, "Il consiglio di Pallade" (The Council of Pallas Athena), and how she rediscovered it. This is detailed in her recent book [Convent Music and Politics in](#)

[Eighteenth-Century Vienna](#). Although composed by a nun for performance in her convent, the text is secular: the surviving score and libretto label it as a "festa teatrale", a "festive theater piece" or a "theatrical festivity" from 1697. It was composed for the celebrations of the annual visit of the emperor and his family to the Viennese convent of St. Jacob, which gave the nuns the opportunity to express their gratitude for the his support.

The 1995 Norton/Grove *Dictionary of Women Composers* states that only one work by Raschenau is known (through its libretto) and that no music survives. Prof. Page, through her magisterial conquests of Viennese archives—both of the court and of the religious institutions—found more libretti that named Raschenau as the composer. She then linked them to uncredited scores that set the texts of these libretti, allowing the composer to be identified. This determined sleuthing has recovered two oratorios and two "festa teatrale" by Raschenau.

A plot summary for each of the vocal works would have been helpful. While all the singers were compelling actors, the confines of the altar did limit the possibility for dramatic motion. In "Il consiglio di Pallade" a debate, moderated by Athena, is taking place among the seven liberal arts, as part of a larger attempt to resolve the question of which is more important, military might or knowledge. In the excerpt presented, Pallas Athena (Pallade) confronts Aritmetica, who is leaving the council in frustration; Aritmetica feels her power is misused and misunderstood. Pallade convinces her that the understanding of arithmetic is the power of reason that distinguishes human beings from animals; and in a lengthy passage of growing intensity, Pallade convinces Aritmetica, that this realm – (that of the reigning Emperor, their patron) is the wisest and most desirable. As Pallade, Kimberly Ayres was a vocally warm soprano; her entire range was effortless, and Pallade's monologue was given impelling dramatic intensity. Countertenor Nicholas Tamagna, as Aritmetica, brought brilliance to the role.

The musical style was one of fluid and expressive recitative, more familiar to the mid- rather than later 17<sup>th</sup> century. The ensemble responded with great sensitivity to the spontaneity of the singers' exchanges, and the more rhythmic Arioso passages emerged to give a feeling of great resolve. This first glimpse of Raschenau's music was impressive and intriguing, and I hope to hear more!

About Camilla de Rossi, we know even less. No biographical information survives apart from the fact that the Austrian emperor commissioned four Oratorios from her in the years 1707-1710. We heard selections from two of these, *Santa Beatrice d'Este*, and *Il figliuol prodigo*. Rossi's style is more recognizably Handelian, with clear-cut ABA arias, preceded by introductory recitatives.

In *Santa Beatrice d'Este*, Kimberly Ayres essayed the title role, with Tamagna as the sister, Giuliana. Ayres' first aria, "Che me giova," took a frantic pace; I felt it needed more *gravitas*. Perhaps this was done to contrast with the following duet of the sisters, but this had its own serious and reflective tone, with its imitative exchanges. While Ayres' lyrical warmth balanced beautifully with Tamagna in this duet, in other passages of virtuosic rapidity, she needed more articulate crispness to match that of the string players.

La Donna Musicale performed *Il figliuol prodigo* in 2012 [reviewed [here](#)], (preview interview with La Donna's director, Laury Gutiérrez [\[here\]](#)), and soprano Kimberly Moller was brought back to portray the brother of the title role. But how that brother figured in the story was not clear; some summary of the plot would have been helpful. Oddly, the title *Il figliuol prodigo* was never translated in the program. Sure, I knew it was "The Prodigal Son," but certainly not everyone did. And the cryptic abbreviations in the text, "Frat." (for fratello, the brother) and "Fi. Pro." (for *figliuol prodigo*) should have been spelled out. Also it might facilitate following the texts if spacing could show which is the "A" section and which is the "B." These are small details, perhaps, but helpful when encountering a new work.

As the brother, Kimberly Moller offered a vivid portrayal and great vocal agility. In her aria "Tuona il Cielo" (The Heaven Thunders) she and violinist Ku engaged in virtuosic exchanges. In the title role, Tamagna was outstanding, with a remarkable range of expression, and great inventiveness in ornamenting the repeating sections. He brought evocative emotion to poignant arias, such as "Con la spoglia del pentimento" (Adorned with the rags of repentance).

A great variety of instrumentation was achieved, with Bill Good on Chitarrone/Theorbo (those are two names for one instrument, I figured this out), Ruth McKay (on both organ and harpsichord), Gutiérrez (viola da Gamba), Ku and Grimes (violins), Jane Starkman (viola), and Janet Haas (violone). The second section of *Il figliuol prodigo* began with a spirited instrumental section with energetic exchanges among the bowed strings. Two arias featuring the viola d'gamba and violone as obbligato instruments were carried off assuredly. In several instances ragged moments were encountered when the B sections ended; in returning to the A sections confusion seem to follow over who was following whom; it might have been helpful if the singers and Ku could have seen each other.

The work ends with the Prodigal son's expression of contrition: sorrowful in its recitative, with Tamagna holding the last note in a lengthy peroration, and then, an Aria of determination as a Finale, a commitment to true repentance, emphasized by string flourishes.

Gutiérrez mentioned plans to record *Il figliuol prodigo*, so we can look forward to an important recording.

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