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The Seven Psalms of David, Volumes I / II

La Donna Musicale, Laury Gutiérrez,
viola da gamba and director
La Donna Musicale 2004
(available at www.ladm.org)
57:32 minutes / 59:40 minutes

These are the first two releases made by La Donna Musicale on its own label. Devoted to exploring the music of baroque women composers, the group has come up with an impressive pair of calling cards in these discs.

For most music-lovers, the name of Antonia Padoani Bembo (c.1640-c.1720) will mean little, and I believe these are the first recordings of her music. She was born to a Dr Giacomo Padoani in Venice, where she trained in music (singing and presumably composition) with no less than Francesco Cavalli. In 1659 she wed a member of the patrician Bembo family, but the marriage proved a difficult and unhappy one. After a particularly ugly divorce, around 1676 she fled Venice to France, where she was granted a pension by King Louis XIV and was able to settle in a community of Christian women outside Paris for the rest of her life.

Padoani Bembo was an active and productive composer. Her output survives in a set of six manuscript volumes. The first volume, designated *Produzioni Armoniche*, contains cantatas, mostly for soprano (her voice), with Italian, French, and Latin texts. The next volume contains a Latin *Te Deum* and an Italian *serenata*. The following three volumes have a larger *Te Deum*, Latin motets, a Psalm setting, and Bembo's own treatment of the libretto for *Ercole Amante* that her teacher Cavalli had set for Louis XIV.

It is the sixth of her manuscript volumes that offers the material for our two discs. It contains, according to the title-page, *Le Sept Pseaumes de David, Mis en Air par Mme Bembo, Noble Vene* (The Seven Psalms of David, Set in Song by Madame Bembo, Venetian Noble). The texts are not the usual Vulgate Latin ones, but are drawn from the French translations of Elisabeth-Sophie Chéron (1648-1711), published first in 1694 and then again in 1715 under the title *Essay de Pseaumes et Cantiques mis en Verse*. The seven penitential psalms are 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, and 141 (Latin numbering).

Bembo set two of them for solo soprano, four for two voices, and one for four voices, all with varied instrumental combinations of flute(s) and violin(s) plus continuo. Their musical style is highly personal, reflecting her fusion of the Italian styles she was trained in with the French styles she worked amid. Her use of dissonances and novel harmonic turns is often quite unconventional. At the same time, her writing is expertly vocal and genuinely expressive. For perspective on her Psalms, we should think of idiom of Lamentations settings for solo voices(s) and continuo as *Leçons de Ténèbres* for Holy Week, best represented by Charpentier and Couperin. Against those—dating from generally the same time—the very individual Italianate character of her writing stands in even clearer relief.

Since these seven Psalms could not be accommodated on a single disc, they are spread over two, with apt fillers in the form of three pieces by Bembo's distinguished contemporary among women composers in France, Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre (1665-1729): a solo sonata in Vol. I, a keyboard prelude and a trio sonata in Vol. II.

The two volumes were recorded in separate sessions over two years, with some changes of personnel. The performers number four sopranos, a tenor (the ubiquitous Aaron Sheehan), a baritone, and a bass. The ladies do the heavy lifting, and do it handsomely. I admire in particular the singing of Sherezade Panthaki (in Vol. II). Between the two volumes, I counted a total of four violinists and two flutists (one of them Claire Fontijn, author of the new biography of Bembo), plus three keyboard players and gambist Gutiérrez. The instrumental work is exemplary, stylish, and supportive of the singers.

The booklets contain excellent essays, plus full texts and translations. Collectors of French Baroque music are in for a revelation with these two discs; and this ensemble, with its label, deserves attention and encouragement.