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Distant sisters: La Donna Musicale is dedicated to the unearthing of women composers and their works

by Liane Curtis

La Donna Musicale performs music by 17th-century women composers, a concurrent event of the Boston Early Music Festival, at the First Lutheran Church, June 14.

It's one of the reasons I love living in Boston – not only to be in a city with a rich musical and cultural life, but also to be in an area where the cutting edge of feminist scholarship intersects with the work of brilliant and insightful musicians, bringing life to music that has been hidden in dusty neglect for centuries. La Donna Musicale is devoted to performing music by women composers, often collaborating with scholars to discover and decipher music available only through archives and foreign libraries. Antonia Bembo (fl. 1640-1720) provided the major work of the afternoon, the monumental Psalm 101, “Lord who sees my tears.”

Although born in Italy, Bembo's music shows the influence of her long residence in Paris, where she was associated with the court of Louis XIV. Soprano Cristi Catt and baritone Mark Andrew Cleveland offered a radiant and energetic performance of this work, which, with its sectional structure and changes of mood and tempo, owes much to the French operatic language of the time. Elizabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre is one of the better known composers from the court of Louis XIV. Her 1707 Sonata was sensitively played by Na'ama Lion (flute) and Noriko Yasuda (harpsichord).

Only four pieces survive by Alba Trissina (fl. 1590-1638), and two of them were on the program. Daniela Tosic (alto) was luscious and evocative in the sensual “Vulnerasti cor meum” – “you wounded my heart, my sisterly bride, with a glance of your eyes”: it was nothing less than a steamy torch song given a fitting, sultry performance, with Ruth McKay accompanying on the organ, and founding director Laury Gutiérrez on the viola da gamba. In the following work, “In nomine Jesu,” Tosic and Gutiérrez exchanged virtuosic leaps and flourishes in a rapturous duet. Violinists Laura Gulley and Susanna Cortesio were elegant and spirited in a Sonata by Isabella Leonarda. One of the most prolific 17th-century composers, Leonarda's music is driving and full of passionate contrasts. The ensemble concluded with two short, festive motets by Rafaella Alleotti, which sparkled in their use of the voices together with the violins, as well as continuo instruments.

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