

The Boston Globe

August 5, 2004

In concert: works by women of the 17th century

by Denise Taylor

Laury Gutierrez is the kind of musician who will fly a few thousand miles, navigate the streets of Paris, make her way to La Bibliothque nationale's cache of rare books, and don protective gloves just to search for a piece of forgotten music. When you lead an ensemble that performs solely the works of early women composers, you just have to be part gumshoe.

"I read recently that in the 17th century there was more music composed by women composers than in the 20th century. The breadth of music from that time was huge," says Gutierrez, who directs and plays viola da gamba for the Boston-based group La Donna Musicale.

She says that although a couple of Baroque and Renaissance women composers are somewhat well known, most have been ignored, their scores unseen and their music unheard. Acting on tips and advice from music historians, La Donna Musicale has unearthed more than 1,000 such works since its founding 11 years ago.

Members have gleaned them from facsimiles, microfiche, and precious, yellowing originals. They strained to decipher the quirks of handwritten scores. They relied on their expertise to translate antiquated notation. They separated the wheat from the chaff. But, most important, they performed.

"With music, you have to perform it, otherwise it doesn't exist. That's why it's so important to us to perform this music and why we're so thrilled and passionate about it," says Gutierrez, who lives in Jamaica Plain.

This Tuesday in Weston, La Donna will present the modern premiere of two sections from Antonia Bembo's "The Seven Psalms of David," a piece Gutierrez copied from the original in Paris (ca. 1640-1722). Also premiering is a motet by Maria Xaviera Peruchona (1675).

"People who come to hear our concerts in August will be the first ones to hear this music in our time," she says.

The two works are what Gutierrez calls "meaty pieces."

"There's nothing light about them," she says. Bembo's

scoring of two Psalms of David translates rage at circumstance and divine mercy into an intricate score. "What's interesting about Bembo is that she finds her own language," she says. "She's very unorthodox in the way she modulates the music."

Peruchona's motet "talks about how people are walking in darkness," says Gutierrez. "The text holds one note for many measures and the voices imitate each other and float as if they are looking through the darkness, searching. Then you have this wild 'Surgite!' which means 'Arise! Arise!' and you really jump out of your seat, because they're very fast notes."

Also on the program, titled "Sweet Mercy: Works of 17th-Century Women Composers," are pieces by Ursuline nun Isabella Leonarda, secular composer Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, and Benedictine nun Chiara Margarita Cozzolani. Not all of the music written by nuns in 17th-century convents meets La Donna Musicale's high standards, but Cozzolani was an exception. "The nuns experienced some kind of ecstasy of enlightenment and illumination," says Gutierrez. "Cozzolani creates this buildup to a moment of ecstasy by repeating the music faster to create a sense of thrill and elation."

Seven members of the group will perform, including violinist Laura Gulley of Providence, flutist Na'ama Lion of Newton, organist/harpsichordist Ruth McKay of Watertown, Gutierrez on viola da gamba, and vocalists Margaret Hunter of Somerville, Daniela Tosic of Lexington, and Aaron Sheehan of Boston. La Donna Musicale plays at 8 p.m. Tuesday at St. Peter's Church, 320 Boston Post Road in Weston. (Additional shows are Aug. 11 in Ipswich and Aug. 12 in Boston.) Tickets are \$15, \$10 for seniors and students.

For more information, call 617-461-6973