



NEWSLETTER

Viola da Gamba Society

New England

Spring 2009



PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Laury Gutiérrez, director of the renowned ensemble La Donna Musicale, which is devoted to performing the works of women composers, has this year been fortunate to be a Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. This fellowship has enabled her to follow her passion to explore unknown, unperformed music by Baroque and Classical women composers. For example, she journeyed to Prague, where she discovered some previously unknown vocal pieces by Anna Bon (c.1739/40-?). Some of the fruits of her research were presented in a concert titled "Passionate Scenes" on Sunday, March 1 at 3 PM at Sanders Theater, performed by La Donna Musicale. For this performance the ensemble consisted of eight singers and nine instrumentalists. Laury also delivered a talk the next day, Monday, March 2, at the Radcliffe Institute, on five Italian women composers from 1568 to 1768, bringing in some of the performers and music from the day before, as well as explicating the historical backdrop of the music.

I was honored to have a chance to look at copies of the manuscripts for some of this music as Laury was preparing playing editions for the performers. The excerpts from the two operas, Francesca Caccini's *La liberazione di Ruggiero dall'isola d'Alcina* and Antonia Bembo's *L'Ercole amante*, were the most daunting, being large scale with multiple sections, and in the case of *L'Ercole amante*, written in a notation that is difficult to decipher. There were also editorial decisions regarding fictions that occupied a good deal of Laury's attention. While Caccini's opera has attracted interest before, Bembo's *L'Ercole amante* is receiving its world premiere by La Donna; they have been performing excerpts for several years. It is indeed a passionate, haunting work. The concert included another – modern – world premier: Anna Bon's "Eje in preces," a lilting Classical aria to the Virgin, for soprano accompanied by two violins, viola, and continuo.

Much of the Baroque music by women that has survived to be appreciated and enjoyed today is vocal with instrumental accompaniment of some kind. With excerpts from two operas on the program, Laury had assembled a small orchestra which included four viol players: Laury herself, who both bowed and plucked her instrument like a lute; Penny Schwarze, who also played viola; Motomi Igarashi, who played lirone and violone; and Janet Haas on violone. Harpsichord and organ completed this rich continuo section; the treble instruments were a cornetto and two violins. There were two instrumental interludes: a sonata by Isabella Leonarda (1620-1704), played on cornetto, violin, bass viol, violone and organ; and a lovely short suite that Bembo inserted into her opera, for two violins and continuo. The program opened with the full band playing the overture to Caccini's opera. The variety of instrumental combinations worked beautifully with the talented and accomplished vocal soloists throughout the performance.