

Concert review (Boston Early Music News, Volume XV, No.7)

Emma Kirkby, soprano; Lars Ulrik Mortensen, harpsichord
2/21/98, Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory of Music

Like it or not, she's the Queen. A veritable icon of early music. For thousands her name is practically synonymous with "early music soprano"; ironically, among these are found both fervent devotee and vehement derogator. Her fans lavish her with praise as having a singularly pure, heavenly tone, impeccable intonation, extraordinary vocal agility, and subtle yet superbly exquisite musicality. Her critics - many of whom are early music aficionados - are equally vociferous in their condemnation, describing that same voice as having the tone quality of a sine wave, lacking resonance, and giving utterly soulless interpretations. Indeed, few performers polarize listeners so clearly into opposite camps.

Who is right? As in most debates where opposing sides speak exclusively in superlatives, some truth is to be found in both positions.

I confess - unashamedly so - to possess more than my fair share of Emma Kirkby recordings. I would sooner part with one of my digits than with her rendition of Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*, her lute songs are sublime, and her angelic voice is the only thing saving my Gothic Voices' Hildegard recording from the used-CD bin. I must also confess, however, that Saturday's concert at Jordan Hall gave me a newfound appreciation for the anti-Kirkby camp. Yes, the Queen is mortal.

The program started with Händel's cantata *Nice, che fa?*, a rather lackluster work dating from Händel's early years in Rome. Though performed with a fair amount of flair, surely Ms. Kirkby and Hr. Mortensen would have been better served choosing a stronger piece to begin with, if not more suitable with the rest of the vocal music on the program (all English repertoire). Additionally, Ms. Kirkby did not seem to be entirely at home with the work, singing from a black binder to which she constantly referred. In fact, she performed the entire first half of the program from music, which was somewhat distracting to both performer and audience. I'm not fanatic about performers having to memorize music, but considering that this was at least their third stop on a tour of this program I found it curious; moreso considering that they recorded a CD of several of these pieces. I dare say that Dawn Upshaw or Jessye Norman would not even think about taking a program on a world tour without fully knowing the music.

The second work on the program was one of Scarlatti's 500+ sonatas for solo keyboard, the Sonata in F minor, K184. Like many of the others, this is a quirky, halting piece with ear-twisting dissonance and virtuosic runs. Known as one of the foremost champions of his fellow Dane, Buxtehude, Lars Ulrik Mortensen performed with both vigor and sensitivity. He milked the repeated, obsessive dissonant passages, and imbued just enough rubato to bring out the seductive quality of the work lost in a more rhythmically strict approach.

This was followed by a series of songs by Maurice Greene (1696-1755) which revealed why Händel resented the man: Not for Greene's talent, but for his great (and inexplicable, if these pieces are representative) success. Again, one questions the programming choices. *Orpheus with his lute* was hardly worthy of its musically gifted protagonist, *Like as a huntsman* plodded along as a coy text tried to compensate in humor for utter musical flatness, and *Bel mirar* sounded like a second-rate imitation of Händel imitating Carissimi. The best of the set was *Sweet smile*, a charming song that highlighted Kirkby's assets: a winsome, tuneful refrain wrapped around fast yet mellifluous running passages.

Fortunately, the second half of the concert made up for what the first half lacked in both performance and programming. Finally freed from her binder and with some real music to work with, Kirkby gave us a glimpse of why she became the star she is. Her facial and body language became more animated, she moved around the stage, engaged the audience, and her singing became more confident and convincing.

John Blow's "mad song" *Lysander I pursue* provided the first stirring moments of the night, with Kirkby and Mortensen coaxing the audience along for the emotional rollercoaster ride. Again Kirkby's strengths

were featured; her light voice adeptly executing both the slow, melancholic passages and the quick runs and ornamentation.

Without a doubt the highlights of the entire concert were Purcell's *If music be the food of love* and the stunning *Musick for a while*. There is good reason why these are among the Top-40 Hits of English early music, and one wonders at what musical heights Purcell could have attained had he not died a young man. Kirkby's performance of these gems was wonderful and expressive, though often at the expense of diction. The audience was clearly moved and most appreciative, evidenced by a chorus of "oohs" and "aahs," and energetic applause.

Hr. Mortensen's playing was consistently superb, exhibiting mastery of the art of accompanying - no easy task - as well as solo playing. His constant bobbing and weaving was peculiar, but for me never reached the point of distraction. Odd, however, was the decision to place Kirkby stage right, forcing him to continually contort his neck 120° in order to see and follow her. The decision to break up William Croft's *Suite in C minor* and scatter the movements throughout the second half may not have been strictly HIP, but it provided refreshing breaks between all the Blow and Purcell songs, allowing us to cleanse our aural palates before each new dish.

One consistent problem throughout the evening was the balance between voice and harpsichord. This was made plain in Blow's *The self-banished*, the only piece on which Mortensen used the lute stop. For the first time one was able to clearly hear Kirkby over the harpsichord without straining at soft passages and ends of phrases. Certainly blame cannot be placed on Mortensen, whose playing was perfectly restrained and artfully alternated between single and double manuals. Neither can the hall be blamed; this was Jordan Hall with a single harpsichord, after all, not Symphony Hall with an orchestra! One wonders whether Ms. Kirkby had the "sensitivity dial" turned up too high, whether she was in full voice (she did touch her throat several times during the concert), or whether she is just too used to singing with lute. One also speculates, however, on just how important microphone placement is to the success of her recordings...hmm.

Yes, the Queen is mortal; but don't we want it that way? If current polls are any indication, we Americans *like* to see the frailties and flaws of our royalty; that way we know they're human. Saturday's concert was far from flawless - it was in fact fraught with flaws - yet there were many delightful and marvelous moments. Taking Emma Kirkby off the pedestal does not lessen the greatness of her contribution to early music, and may ultimately allow both camps to temper their positions and hear the music for a while.

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