

Concert review (Boston Early Music News, Volume XVI, No.1)

Liber unUsualis: “Voices of Florence”

Carolann Buff, mezzo; Melanie Germond, soprano; William Hudson, tenor
7/30/98, Lindsey Chapel, Emmanuel Church, Boston

Isn't it great every once in a while to be able to say “I told you so?”

Just one year ago **Liber unUsualis** was a young vocal trio breaking their teeth on the concurrent series of the Boston Early Music Festival. They had just been invited to England as the only American finalists in the York International Young Artists Competition, and were brimming with nervous energy. At the time I wrote that no matter what happened in York, this ensemble was going places.

Here comes the “I told you so” part: Not only did they come a hair's width from winning the competition (the jury created a brand new Honourable Mention category just for them), but they were invited to return this year as part of the York Early Music Festival, the St. Mary-le-Bow Series in London, and were recorded by the BBC. In the meantime they've become regular figures in the New England early music scene.

The program presented on this summer's SoHip series was titled “Voices of Florence:” a chronological guided tour through two centuries of Florentine music. The familiar names of Landini, DuFay and Isaac – composers who worked at some point in Florence – were paired with the more obscure Antonius de Cividale, Don Paolo da Firenze, and Costanzo Festa.

An early highlight was DuFay's wonderful song praising Florence, *Mirandas parit hæc urbs florentina puellas*. The three voices weaved seamlessly around one another, and at times it was difficult to differentiate between **Buff** and **Hudson**, they blended so well. Aside from the sketchy *Si dolce non sonò* by Landini, the ensemble's intonation was generally superb. (The problems here were most likely the result of the low tessitura, which had soprano **Germond** groveling around the basement.) One of the most striking features of 14th century music to modern ears is the tendency to cadence on a doubled or tripled unison, which seems to pop out of nowhere from the complex counterpoint; this is also fiendishly difficult to nail as a singer, and **Liber** did so without exception.

The performers explained that the three-part *ballate* by Don Paolo have text assigned to only one or two voices in the manuscripts (the other parts obviously performed by instruments). Though there is evidence that a purely vocal tradition did exist for this music, exactly what it was is still a mystery. Even the leading champion of this practice, Christopher Page, has changed his mind on more than one occasion. Rather than looking for a single, dogmatic answer, **Liber** explained that they approached each piece individually and decided upon different solutions for each of them, from having the lower two voices vocalize on “ahh” to doing the text underlay themselves. The first approach was particularly effective on *Se per virtù*. It gave the effect of a solo song with accompaniment (probably the composer's intent), allowing **Germond** to emerge from the texture and the audience to follow the text, which is otherwise incomprehensible in elaborate contrapuntal passages.

The first half closed with an upbeat celebration of Florence's victory over Pisa, Don Paolo's *Godi, Firenze*. A welcome change after so much unrequited love, the singers were clearly enjoying themselves and sang with conviction and musicality.

However splendid 14th and early 15th century music may be, the second half of the program was where the ensemble really shined. The late-15th to early 16th century was a period of radical change, with complex rhythms and counterpoint shifting towards triadic homophy as a result of an emphasis on the affects and emotions of the text. Tessituras also expanded to real SAT; a distinct advantage for **Liber**. In general the balance was better in the second half, as each singer was able to sing comfortably in his/her own range.

In the carnival song *Canto del mòro di Granata*, we finally got to hear **Germond's** full voice in her crystalline, resonant upper range...more, more! The homophonic nature of the music also allowed the ensemble to push dynamics to real *pianos* and *fortes*, especially in the beautifully performed Festa madrigals, *Modann', io mi consumo* and *Madonna, al volto mio*.

The gem of the night was Costanzo Festa's lyrical "sacred-madrigal," *Ave Regina cælorum*. A simply gorgeous piece, it rivals Josquin's *Ave Maria* as one of the most sublime, sensual Marian settings of the period. To their credit, **Liber** don't approach it in a sacrosanct manner, but as a personal, intimate love song. Mmmmm.

It would have been nice to have taken one tiny step in both directions, chronologically speaking, to really give a complete picture of Florentine music. Florence was one of the centers of the *laude* – a kind of "sacred pop-music" that was enormously influential for centuries – and the famous collection found there is one of only two Italian musical documents from the 13th century. Likewise, who can mention Florence without immediately thinking of the *Florentine Camerata* of the late 16th century, where Baroque music was in effect conceived? Inclusion of at least one of these eras would have rounded out the program, as well as provided a bit of variety from 3-voice polyphonic texture.

The program notes state that "The flowering of art and music in Florence...was due to the patronage of wealthy merchant families such as the Medici. This music shows what a little money can do." In their presentation of the fruits of the great Florentine patrons, **Liber unUsualis** in turn showed what a little talent can do.

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