

Concert review (Boston Early Music News, Volume XVI, No. 4)

Harvard Early Music Society/Harvard Baroque Chamber Orchestra:

Claudio Monteverdi - *L'Incoronazione de Poppea* (1642)

Edward Jones, Music Director; Lane Shadgett, Stage Director

Tonia D'Amelio, Poppea; Christian Quilici, Nero; Eleanor Hubbard, Ottavia; Carolann Buff, Ottone
Nov. 5-7, 12-14, 1998, Agassiz Theatre, Harvard University, Cambridge

Give credit to the Harvard Early Music Society. Just a year old, this primarily undergraduate organization has already staged two full-scale operas (last year was Purcell's *The Fairy Queen*), and has plans for two more productions this season. HEMS's attitude is "Hey, if nobody else in town is going to do this stuff, then *we* will!" They take these ambitious undertakings quite seriously, and have enlisted an impressive list of coaches and "advisors," including Thomas Kelly, Ellen Hargis, Robert Mealy, Murray Somerville, Robert Levin and William Christie.

Unfortunately ambition, energy, and spunk do not compensate for lack of experience or vocal talent, and HEMS's production of Monteverdi's final opera was very inconsistent.

Let's start with the good points. **Lane Shadgett's** decidedly non-HIP staging was remarkably creative and kept the audience thoroughly entertained start-to-finish. A traditional approach would surely have made the production more vulnerable to the musical weaknesses. The costumes were Generation-X-meets-*Jesus Christ Superstar*: leopard skin, velour, dark sunglasses, vintage-70's and grunge-chic. Nero was cast as a cross between Jim Morrison and Herod from *Superstar*; ultra-cool, dripping sexuality (directed towards both genders), borderline insane, short-tempered and decadent to the core. Ottavia - the jilted First Lady - was a cross between Jackie-O and *Ray of Light*-era Madonna. Ziggy Stardust goddesses struck poses on the minimalistic set behind the action, and bodyguards straight out of *Men in Black* hovered in the shadows, Uzi's doubtlessly just out of site. Too often the opera strayed into the realm of unintentional farce and thus lost emotional impetus (much of the story is, after all, about heartbreak and disloyalty), but it sure made for a good time. The acting was generally quite good and the audience clearly enjoyed itself, myself included.

In its entirety *Poppea* lasts well over three hours. Music Director **Ed Jones** wisely made substantial cuts, removing a substantial amount of extraneous material. He did a remarkable job; despite entire characters and scenes being eliminated, the action and storyline flowed seamlessly and musical segues were smooth. Likewise, **Jone's** decision to avoid "large-scale systematic formula for specific instrumental association with particular characters" in favor of judicious changes in continuo texture was effective. His tempi were relaxed (good for student performers who had trouble with rapid passages) and his directing from the harpsichord was restrained but clear. However, the intonation of the **HBCO** strings (playing a combination of period and modern instruments) was poor from the opening overture and never improved.

As for the singers... Granted, this was a student production. Granted, too, Harvard is not Indiana, Longy, or any other school with a substantial early music performance program (there is, in fact, *no* performance degree at Harvard). Nevertheless, the singing left much to be desired compared even to other local student productions.

Countertenor **Christian Quilici** has a bright and resonant tone (more than can be said about some of his cohorts), but his voice was frequently out-of-control and regularly below pitch. Soprano **Tonia D'Amelio** was quite enjoyable as the lustful Poppea, but her tone was a bit shallow and her intonation was inconsistent. **Navaz Karanjia** provided several nice moments as Arnalta. Others were less successful.

Fortunately there were exceptions. Mezzo-soprano **Carolann Buff** -- familiar to Boston audiences from the medieval vocal trio **Liber unusualis** -- was extraordinary as the (also) jilted Ottone. Her intonation was immaculate, her diction clear, and in terms of musicality she stole the show. She was also the only singer able to add and execute appropriate Italian Baroque ornamentation (aside from scattered attempts at *trillos*,

or "goat's trills"). Tenor **William Hudson** (also in **Liber unUsualis**) saved more than one duet from utter disaster, and reminded us that all those fast melismas are actually comprised of distinct itches!

Bass **John Driscoll** was excellent in the role of Seneca. His voice is smoothly lyrical in the upper register, and deep and sonorous in the middle and low ranges, able to fill the entire hall without sounding strained or piercing. Though the runs were a bit muddy, his voice is imbued with a lovely, natural resonance. I have no idea who he is (see next paragraph), but I look forward to hearing more from him in the future.

Now for a small bit of advice to HEMS: run spell-check and have an editor read through the copy before sending programs to the printer. Characters were referred to by two or three different names (at one point I overheard audience members speculating about whether "Ottone," "Otto" and "Otho" were in fact three different characters), and numerous grammatical errors made an otherwise professional looking program seem amateur. Also, brief bios about the artists - at least those in lead roles - would have been appreciated (and not just by music critics).

I would reconsider plans for a *Messiah*: Boston hardly needs yet another HIP *Messiah* (let alone 1/2-HIP), and HEMS is not up to going head-to-head against Boston Baroque and H&H. That said, HEMS brings a fresh new voice to the early music scene, and perhaps more importantly provides invaluable learning experiences for young performers. Given their enterprise, zeal and growing experience each production will undoubtedly improve.

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