

## Review

**Apollo's Fire's Passacaglia Baroque Blues Club  
opens for the weekend in Cleveland (November 2)**

by Timothy Robson

Nell Snaidas  
sopranoKarim Sulayman  
tenor haute-contreOliver Mercer  
tenorJeffrey Strauss  
baritone

One of the enchanting aspects of Apollo's Fire's concerts, the current set of which are taking place the weekend of November 1-4 in various locations in northeast Ohio, are their stage presentation and director Jeanette Sorrell's fluency in making even fairly obscure concepts and music interesting to a general audi-

ence, as well as those versed in early music. Such was the case with "Passacaglia: Laments, Madrigals & Dances from Monteverdi to Charpentier," heard on Friday, November 2, at Trinity Cathedral in downtown Cleveland.

In this case, the musical theme was the "passacaglia," and Ms. Sorrell likened the repeating bass line patterns of the passacaglia (also known variously as chaconne, ciaccona, passamezzo, passacaille, or, even more plainly, "ground bass," depending on the language and country of origin) to the four-bar blues patterns of American jazz, which are an outline upon which the musicians create elaborate improvisations. Ms. Sorrell structured the program around the idea of the blues club, in which the singers and instrumentalists came and went from the stage, danced, and participated in the "party" at hand. In her program notes, Ms. Sorrell emphasized the idea that in the early seventeenth century "art music" and "popular music" were stylistically identical. So we heard selections as diverse as laments of spurned lovers and a setting of "Magnificat," Mary's hymn of praise after being told by the angel Gabriel that she will give birth to the Son of God. The four singers, seven instrumentalists and Ms. Sorrell were all top-notch and gave technically virtuosic performances while never sacrificing musical communication with the large audience.

Samuel Capricornus's *O felix jucunditas* ("O Happy Delight") opened the concert, with the three male singers, Karim Sulayman, tenor *haute-contre* (a very high tenor found most often in French Baroque opera, with a vocal range somewhat higher than a tenor, but not generally singing in falsetto, as would be the case for a countertenor); Oliver Mercer, tenor; and Jeffrey Strauss, baritone, with Baroque guitars and theorbo continuo, with subtle drum beats in the background. The text is an exclamation on the delight that the righteous find in the presence of God's holiness. The singers had mastered the extremely florid vocal writing, and the instrumentalists added stylish improvisations.

A second instrumental work by Capricornus followed, a *Ciacona* in D Major, in which violinists Olivier Brault and Karina Fox gave us what could be described as a Baroque jam session with René Schiffer playing the repeating bass pattern on cello and Ms. Sorrell filling in the harmonies on the portative organ with William Simms and John Lenti strumming along on Baroque guitar and theorbo. Percussionist Rex Benincasa contributed to the party atmosphere.

By the time the *Ciacona* finished, Mssrs. Sulayman and Mercer had strolled into the Baroque Jazz Club and were right there to begin Claudio Monteverdi's famous setting of Ottavio Rinuccini's poem *Zefiro, torna* ("Zephyr returns"), with its descriptions of the beauty of summer flowers and breezes, only to take an unexpected turn at the end, divulging that the character is tormented by love. The singers were convincing in their eye-blink switch from the *arioso* melodic passages to stark lamenting recitative.

An unannounced selection was added to the program, *Gallardes*, by the seventeenth-century Spanish Santiago de Murcia, originally as a guitar solo, played by William Simms, but here, with John Lenti, theorbo, improvising an accompanying bass line. Ms. Sorrell said that during rehearsal she had heard the two players "jamming", and it was so good that they decided to include it in the concert. It was, indeed, fascinating to hear the players interact with each other.

One of the highlights of the program was the *Passamezzo Moderno (Recercada II)* by Diego Ortiz, in which violinist Julie Andrijeski, who is also a specialist in Baroque dance, performed an elaborate set of steps that clearly were a precursor of what we now recognize as flamenco. Mr. Schiffer played an increasingly complex set of variations on the bass pattern, with harpsichord, drum and tambourine accompaniment.

Baritone Jeffrey Strauss was featured in *L'Eraclito Amaro* by Barbara Strozzi, seventeenth-century Venetian singer, composer and poet. Strozzi studied with Francesco Cavalli, Monteverdi's assistant at San Marco in Venice. *L'Eraclito Amaro* is the imagined musings of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, lamenting — as so many Baroque vocal and choral works do — about the unfaithfulness of an unnamed woman. Musically it is based on a descending "lamenting" ground bass. The vocal line, sung with burrished tone by Mr. Strauss, was accompanied minimally, sometimes just by two theorbos, sometimes by harpsichord.

Monteverdi's famous 1638 *Lamento della ninfa*, from his eighth book of madrigals closed the first part of the program. The three male singers introduce the lament, which is then joined by the soprano (the sweet-voiced soprano Nell Snaidas) who sings the role of the nymph, with commentary by the trio. This was another example of the pleasure that the performers seemed to be taking in presenting this music. It was a ravishing performance.

Following the intermission, one of Englishman Henry Purcell's *Fantasias* in three parts on a ground bass was performed by violinists Brault, Andrijeski and Fox, with each variation becoming ever more virtuosic. Ms. Sorrell provided harpsichord continuo. The instrument was aimed away from the audience to enable Ms. Sorrell to conduct from the keyboard; the sound went up to the rafters of Trinity Cathedral and was mostly inaudible.

The major work on the second half of the program was Marc-Antoine Charpentier's setting of the *Magnificat*, for the three male soloists and continuo. Charpentier did not linger over the text, which was lyrically declaimed, overlapping phrases. It is a work that deserves more frequent performances.

Soprano Nell Snaidas returned for an effective performance of another work by Barbara Strozzi, *L'amante segreto* ("The Secret Lover"), in which the lover is admiring the beloved from a distance, unable to show his love. The refrain "I would rather die than have my pain be discovered" returns throughout. Dramatic recitative passages alternated with *arioso*, moving the drama along.

The concert closed with Monteverdi's "party piece" (as characterized by Ms. Sorrell) written for the court of Mantua and the composer's patron, Prince Fernando. *Movete al mio bel suon* ("Move to My Beautiful Music"), from the composer's eighth book of madrigals, is in two parts with instructions to insert a dance in the middle. All of the evening's performers participated, singing, dancing and playing. The text is a very thinly veiled encomium to Prince Fernando, referring to his lofty and beautiful deeds. The four singers, Ms. Sorrell and even some of the instrumentalists gave it their all with their dancing on the platform and down into the audience. (Thankfully, audience participation was not required.)

Just as when one goes to a fun party, this was a delightful evening spent at the Apollo's Fire Baroque Blues Club, at least some in the audience were sorry to have it end. And the passacaglia turned out not to be the least bit dull.

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