

Apollo's Fire in passionate music (mostly) by Handel and Vivaldi

by Timothy Robson



This weekend Apollo's Fire, directed by Jeannette Sorrell, gave four performances of their latest program, *The Power of Love: Passions of Handel and Vivaldi*. The featured soloist was the brilliant young soprano Amanda Forsythe. I heard the Friday night concert at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights, with its newly renovated acoustics which livened up the sound considerably. The music was mostly Handel and Vivaldi, but Jean-Philippe Rameau made a couple of cameo appearances as well.

One of the hallmarks of Apollo's Fire's performances is the naturalness and freedom of their music-making. Although very carefully planned and rehearsed, the musicians always project a sense of spontaneity and improvisation. Also, Jeannette Sorrell is not afraid to make things her own, as exemplified in the program by two of her transcriptions of Vivaldi works that opened and closed the concert. The Allegro from the *Concerto in D, RV511*, originally for two violins, was arranged as a concerto grosso. It was stylishly done, and had the program not stated it that it was an arrangement, few would have been the wiser.

Kathie Stewart was the flauto traverso soloist in Vivaldi's *Concerto in D major, RV 428* ("Il Gardellino"). The first movement was highly imitative of birds fluttering in the garden, while the second was a pastorale for flute and continuo (which featured plucked string instruments, a charming textural change from the more familiar bowed cello with harpsichord). In the third movement the flute solo and first violin carried on a musical dialogue. In Jeannette Sorrell's program essay she states that most of Vivaldi's concertos were composed for the orphan girls of Venice's *Ospedale della Pietà*. If so, those were

some talented orphans! This was a rousing performance of the work, although at times the solo flute sound merged too much into the sound of the accompanying ensemble.

Handel's *Entrée* and *Chaconne* from *Terpsichore*, HWV8c, began with dramatic upward musical gestures and sharply marked rhythms, before moving on to quick jig-like passages and a lively chaconne. These instrumental movements led to the operatic portion of the performance. The various programs for the weekend presented a slightly different selection of arias. The set on Friday's concert began with "Viens Hymen," from Rameau's *Les Indes Galantes*. Rameau's opera capitalized on the European frenzy of interest in the exploration of the American continents and the "exotic" and mysterious nature of the indigenous people.

Les Indes Galantes concerns itself with a Peruvian princess's forbidden love for a Spanish conquistador. A literal translation of the opera's title is senseless looking back almost 300 years. Jeannette Sorrell pointed out that for the modern audience a title such as "The Cool & Chic Extra-Terrestrials" would be more meaningful. The aria "Viens Hymen" was delicate, with flute, high strings and Baroque guitar accompaniment. Amanda Forsythe had total command of the legato musical line and stylish ornamentation.

Much more virtuosic was Rameau's "L'Amour est le dieux de la paix," Cupid's aria from *Anacreon*, which gave Forsythe much more of a showpiece, with brilliant coloratura and daring leaps from the top of the soprano register to low notes, and repeated high notes worthy of the Queen of the Night in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. The aria celebrates the triumph of love over drink.

The first half of the program ended with "Il primo ardo," from Handel's *Ariodante*, in which the servant Dalinda sings about her secret love for one of the opera's villains. Here, Handel's style is much more overtly coloratura, but was again dispatched with ease by Ms. Forsythe, whose passagework was clean, pitch flawless, and diction clear.

After intermission Apollo's Fire presented one of Vivaldi's most famous works, the *Concerto in A minor for two violins*, op 3, no. 8, RV522. Johann Sebastian Bach admired Vivaldi's concerto so much that he transcribed it as an organ solo. Sorrell paced the piece briskly, with Olivier Brault and Johanna Novom as the soloists. The second movement was especially beautiful, with its intertwined solo voices and minimal ornamentation,

thus allowing Vivaldi's delicious dissonances (and their resolutions) to be heard to full advantage. The third movement Allegro was taken at breakneck speed, but all kept up for a breathless finish.

Amanda Forsythe returned for two arias from Handel's *Giulio Cesare*. "Piangerò la sorte mia," opened with the preceding recitative "E pur così in giorno perdo fasti e grandezze?" in which Cleopatra laments the loss of her kingdom and, she thinks, her beloved Caesar. After a lyric opening, the aria eventually gives vent to Cleopatra's rage: she will torment the conquering Tolomeo, even after her death.

But Caesar is not dead and makes his way to Cleopatra, prompting the aria "Da tempeste il legno infranto," one of the showpieces of *Giulio Cesare*. Amanda Forsythe made this coloratura masterpiece her own, with not a hint of smudge in her passagework, and including even more elaborate ornamentation in the *da capo*. She gave an outstanding performance of the aria.

Jeannette Sorrell and Apollo's Fire closed with more brilliance: another arrangement of a Vivaldi Trio Sonata, then "La Folia," which turned into a kind of Baroque "jam session." The whole group performed from memory, with a sense of improvisation and ever-expanding ornamentation, passing the thematic material around from section to section. It was a tour de force that brought the program to a thrilling conclusion.

After a deserved ovation, there was an encore, a lively early American reel, presented as an enticement for Apollo's Fire's next concerts of Appalachian music in June.

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