

Four Apollo's Fire violinists in Biber's *Mystery Sonatas* (Feb. 3)

by David Kulma



Is it possible to take the standard song and dance forms of your time and turn them into virtuosic devotional meditations on the life of Christ? The composer and master violinist Heinrich Biber answered this question in the affirmative back in the 1670s with a set of 16 violin works — 15 sonatas with continuo and a solo passacaglia — meant to take the musicians through the Mysteries of the Rosary. And not only are these works demanding in scope, they require complex *scordatura* — retuning the violin's strings to new notes for each sonata and giving each work its own color and resonance.

Last weekend's chamber concerts from Apollo's Fire were a lucky chance to hear live a meaningful cross section of these *Mystery Sonatas* with four violinists accompanied by a four-person continuo. I attended the final concert on Sunday, February 3 at Rocky River Presbyterian.

Violinists Johanna Novom, Adriane Post, Karina Schmitz, and Carrie Krause each brought technical facility, tasteful ornamentation, and powerful emotional depth to their two sonatas. It's hard to believe that standardized Baroque dances with variations can meaningfully explore the complex emotions around Jesus' life story, but experiencing it showed this music's power in the hands of dedicated musicians.

Adding to that power were the continuo possibilities realized by Williams Simms (theorbo and guitar), Brian Kay (lute and theorbo), René Schiffer (cello), and Jeffrey

Grossman (harpsichord and positive organ). They all contributed beautifully to the magic that undergirded each sonata.

The Mysteries of the Rosary are divided into three groups, as was the concert. The Joyful Mysteries included Novom's grand reading of the first sonata on the Annunciation and Schmitz's refined playing of the regal fourth sonata on the Presentation of Jesus. The Sorrowful Mysteries started with a restrained, yet sorrowful lute "meditation" by Kay: Bach's *Prelude in c*, BWV 999. Novom then played the grief-riven sixth sonata on the Agony in the Garden followed by Krause's surprisingly bleak reading of the major-key seventh sonata on the Scourging at the Pillar. Post's brutally affecting tenth sonata on the Crucifixion led to a profound rendition of the Sarabande from Bach's Fifth Cello Suite by Schiffer.

After intermission, the Glorious Mysteries began with another musical "meditation" — Grossman's buoyant playing of Johann K. Kerll's trill-filled and filigreed *Toccata No. 8 in G*. Novom gave an ecstatic reading of the octave-filled eleventh sonata on the Resurrection, while Krause ably mimicked brass instruments throughout the twelfth sonata on the Ascension. Simms then offered a lute "celebration" with David Kellner's *Campanella in D*, which wonderfully continued the festive atmosphere. Schmitz rounded out the sonatas with a joyful and bounteous performance of the fourteenth on the Assumption of Our Lady, which charmingly has the violinist stop mid-phrase as the continuo finishes the sonata, painting the arrival of Mary into heaven.

After extended applause, all eight musicians came together to end the evening with a lovely motet by Kaspar Förster, *Dulcis amor Jesu*.

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