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MUSIC REVIEW | PHILHARMONIA BAROQUE

Revisiting a Powerful Statement From a Short-Lived Composer



Joe Kohen for The New York Times

Nicholas McGegan leading Carolyn Sampson, Robin Blaze and his orchestra at Zankel Hall.

By STEVE SMITH
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Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, the great hope of Italian music early in the 18th century, died at 26. His considerable posthumous reputation derives from a bare handful of compositions verified as authentic. But hear an inspired account of his *Stabat Mater*, completed shortly before he succumbed to tuberculosis, and you understand the enormity of the loss. Using only two singers, strings and organ, Pergolesi touched on the ineffable.

That kind of performance ended a concert by Nicholas McGegan and his outstanding San Francisco period-instrument ensemble, the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, at Zankel Hall on Thursday night. Singing the solo parts, originally meant for two castratos, were Carolyn Sampson, a soprano, and Robin Blaze, a countertenor.

At times, Pergolesi's music seems possibly too lively for a subject so weighty as Mary's grief over the crucifixion of Jesus, as in an oddly springy setting of "Quae maerebat et dolebat" ("Who mourned and grieved"). Elsewhere, as strings sigh, flicker or slash, Pergolesi's spare writing cuts to the core of the text.

The two vocalists proved ideally matched, Mr. Blaze's focused sound handsomely

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countering or intertwining with Ms. Sampson’s appealing tone. Pergolesi achieved a striking effect in “Vidit suum dulcem natum” (“She saw her sweet son”), where note values grow longer to suggest vitality ebbing; Ms. Sampson made this a startling sensation, her voice dipping to a pained mutter. Mr. McGegan drew exemplary support from his fine players.

The singers had proved their versatility and theatrical flair in a group of [Handel](#) arias earlier in the program. Mr. Blaze’s cool intensity was an asset in “Dove sei,” a touching lament from the opera “Rodelinda,” and in two duets: “Io t’abbraccio,” also from “Rodelinda,” and “Caro! Bella!” from “Giulio Cesare.”

Ms. Sampson, to put it bluntly, was a marvel. In the “Rodelinda” duet, her clear, focused sound rang with a bittersweet ache; as Cleopatra, she brought a flirty allure to “Caro! Bella!” and the flashy aria “Da tempeste.” In both cases, Ms. Sampson visibly assumed the roles in a manner that informed every leap, curve and florid embellishment she sang.

The instrumentalists, too, took a spin in the spotlight in a robust account of Corelli’s Concerto Grosso in D (Op. 6, No. 4). And Elizabeth Blumenstock, the ensemble’s leader, was a poised, lively soloist in Vivaldi’s Violin Concerto in B flat (RV 375).

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