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'Brava!' to Musica Divina, Aradia

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Musica Divina has long been considered the Ottawa area's premier chorus, although its chamber proportions and exclusive concentration on early repertoire, combined with the fact that it doesn't mount a subscription series, have limited its general appeal.

Aradia is a Toronto-based baroque orchestra well-known to early music enthusiasts through its excellent series of recordings on the Naxos label.

The two joined forces yesterday evening at St-Benoit-Abbe Church in a concert which, to no one's surprise, was truly outstanding.

Conductor Kevin Mallon began the program with Johann Sebastian Bach's Cantata 61, Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland. Aside from the orchestra upstaging the chorus a little, it was an exemplary performance.

Like most of the evening's offerings, the cantata consisted largely of solo singing, the soloists being drawn from the chorus. Although there were too many excellent voices to be credited individually, it's impossible not to mention soprano Teri Dunn, whose serene rendition of the aria *Offne dich mein ganzes Herze* was so compelling that one lady in the audience broke decorum to call out "Brava!" when she had finished. (The lady got a dirty look from the conductor for her trouble.)

The next item was a solo cantata retelling the story of Jonah and the soloist was Dunn. The composer, Elizabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre, is the best-known female composer of the baroque era, and this was the North American premiere of the lovely work. It's far more than a novelty.

Yet one imagines that Dunn could have sung anything and moved the audience. She is truly a wonderful singer.

A complex setting by Lully of Psalm II followed. It included a great deal of solo and small-ensemble singing, providing further proof of Musica Divina's excellence.

One authentic curiosity on the program was a motet by Johann Ludwig Bach, a slightly older second cousin of Johann Sebastian. The performance was terrific even if the music itself was not quite as interesting as the rest of the program.

The orchestra performed splendidly all evening. It offered a pleasingly "authentic" baroque sound without hitting you over the head with it.

Thus it was a special pleasure to hear the instrumentalists on their own, however briefly, in the Sinfonia from J. S. Bach's Cantata 169. The poise and perfection came across most convincingly in this performance.

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O Canadians: Performers find wider audiences

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J.S. Bach, Cantatas BWV 36 ("Schwingt freudig euch empor"), BWV 132 ("Bereitet die Wege, bereitet die Bahn!"), and BWV 61 ("Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland"). Teri Dunn, Matthew White, John Tessier, Steven Pitkanen, Thomas Goerz, **Aradia** Ensemble conducted by Kevin Mallon. Naxos 8.554825.

Naxos has been good to Canadian musicians, and while major ensembles (Montreal Symphony, Tafelmusik) have lost contracts with other top-price labels, several smaller Canadian groups and individual artists have found a home -- and world-wide exposure -- on Naxos. The Toronto-based Aradia Ensemble, performing on original period instruments, is a case in point, for this recording of three of Bach's Christmas cantatas is the group's sixth disc for Naxos. Can these performances compete with other "high-end" Bach cantata recordings already on the shelf (such as the John Eliot Gardiner and Monteverdi Choir readings on Archiv)? Well, yes and no.

There is much to recommend here, including the strong and pure voices of soprano Teri Dunn and tenor John Tessier, with a convincing showing by young counter-tenor Matthew White. Following Joshua Rifkin's model and thus choosing to perform with one singer per part in the chorus and one instrument per string line, the Aradia Ensemble provide readings that are comfortably accessible and humane -- something you might hope to find at a good church concert -- though they are less monumental, highly polished or diversely coloured than performances from more acclaimed Bach cantata specialists. A distinct deficit is Norbert Kraft's sound engineering which evokes from Toronto's Church of St. Mary Magdalene a vastness that only muddies the singer's voices as well as the individual instrumental lines; even the presence of a solitary oboe is spread well beyond a reasonable image of its lean, plaintive tone. Intelligent liner notes and English translations of the German texts are provided.

O Sweet Love: Songs of William Byrd and John Dowland. Daniel Taylor, counter-tenor; Susie Napper and Margaret Little, violas da gamba; Stephen Stubbs, lute. Atma ACD2 2207

Canadian musicians who have recorded for the Quebec-based ATMA label also have reason to rejoice, for ATMA has just signed a contract for world-wide distribution of its catalogue with the well-established and respected Harmonia Mundi organization. Among the Canadian artists who will benefit from broader exposure of their talents is Daniel Taylor, this country's finest counter-tenor who has had audiences in Montreal literally leaping out of their seats with applause. The young singer, who has already recorded on major projects under John Eliot Gardiner, Christopher Hogwood and William Christie, has made several stunning recitals for the Atma label, the latest of which is this collection of swooning, aching, yearning, grieving love songs by the late 16th and early 17th century English masters, William Byrd and John Dowland. Although like many other singers who sacrifice immaculate diction to the altar of unimpeded tonal splendour (Joan Sutherland was one such artist), Taylor sometimes has you guessing as to the exact text, his counter-tenor is undoubtedly one of the sweetest and purest you can hear today, with a certain special quality of unsullied innocence about it. The song selections are interspersed with instrumental works by the same composers, played by Susie Napper, Margaret Little and Stephen Stubbs -- three other lucky Atma artists. A gorgeous, if somewhat linguistically vague, disc.

Read previous Richard Perry columns at www.ottawacitizen.com

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