

Fanfare, September-October 2011 - Christopher Brodersen

MEET MARCELLO DI LISA AND THE CONCERTO DE' CAVALIERI

Your first CD on the cpo label contained sacred music of Alessandro Scarlatti and marked the debut of your ensemble, Concerto de' Cavalieri. Tell us a bit about the group and how it was formed.

It was while I was completing my Ph.D. in Greek and Latin philology at the University of Pisa that I first had the idea of forming a period-instrument orchestra that would bring together some of Italy's finest early-music specialists. About seven years ago we met for our first concert in the main hall of the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, and from that time forward we have been performing the great music of the 17th and 18th centuries, with an emphasis on the lesser-known Roman repertoire. That's my area of specialization, my favorite area of research.

Your group is the latest, it would seem, in a line of excellent period-instrument orchestras to come out of Italy. I'm thinking now of Fabio Biondi's group, or the Venice Baroque Orchestra. It's almost an explosion! To what would you attribute this phenomenon? Are the Italian conservatories turning increasing attention toward period instruments?

Along with several others, Fabio Biondi represents the first generation of Italian musicians who devoted themselves to early music in the '80s and '90s. They proposed a new way of interpretation modeled on the European and American pioneers in the early-music movement. This generated considerable interest in historically informed performance practice and, especially in recent years, caused the Italian conservatories to devote increasing attention toward period instruments, which gave many younger musicians the opportunity to experience the Baroque repertoire. In this, as you say, explosive climate, Concerto de' Cavalieri was formed with the intent of exploring new possibilities in historically informed interpretation, and also to be open to contemporary aesthetics, which I think gives it its own special identity.

What would you say is the distinguishing characteristic of your group, in comparison with the other Italian period-instrument orchestras?

Concerto de' Cavalieri is of course a period-instrument orchestra that avails itself of the latest research. We strive to play the music with the correct historical approach using stylistic and technical features suitable to each historical and geographic context. Nevertheless, in interpreting this music—in our case from the Baroque and Classical eras—I also want to examine the formal aspects of the text using critical linguistic methods, and to use articulation, dynamics, and other interpretative devices to highlight these textual nuances. With such an analytical approach I hope to temper a lively and energetic performance style—one, you might say, that is typically Italian—with intelligence and reason. It is this combination of

passion and reason that in my opinion makes music more expressive and intriguing.

Has your study of ancient Greek and Latin philology given you special insight into the rhetoric of Baroque music? There certainly aren't many conductors before the public who can claim to have a background in the Classics.

Renaissance and Baroque culture is based to a large extent on a reinterpretation of the ancient world, in particular its mythological background, also its rhetorical and poetic tradition. And so it was natural for me to apply some of what I learned in studying the Classics to my interpretations of Baroque music.

Reading the rosters of your two CDs, I notice that in the first you played harpsichord continuo; in the second, the excellent Roberto Loreggian assumes that role. Is that change permanent?

In concert I always play and conduct from the harpsichord, because I like to be a part of the music-making and contribute my ideas directly—I did this on the first CD. Since the various aspects of a recording with large ensemble are best managed from the podium, I decided for the second CD to engage Roberto Loreggian, who is certainly one of the very best keyboard players around. We are completely in agreement as to the conception and realization of the basso continuo. So this change is not permanent; it will remain an option depending on the circumstances.

The string component was also increased between the first and second CD. Do you plan to stay at that level?

This increase is of course due to the change in repertoire. In comparison with Alessandro Scarlatti's sacred music, his operatic music requires a larger orchestra with increased participation from the wind instruments. Generally speaking, our intent with Concerto de' Cavalieri is to progress through the various historical periods, all the way into the Romantic era, which will naturally require increased instrumental forces.

There's some pretty spectacular Baroque trumpet playing to be heard on the second CD. I don't recognize the names; tell us a little about the trumpet players.

They're two excellent players from Rome—Andrea di Mario is the first trumpet and Michele Petrigiani is the second. Andrea di Mario is a musician of long experience who made a major contribution to the recording with his beautiful sound on the trumpet.

Both of your CDs are devoted to the music of Alessandro Scarlatti. The second in particular contains several world premieres; this must have involved a fair amount of original research. How did you come to be interested in Scarlatti's music?

The first phase of the project was done together with Mario Marcarini, who is the executive producer of the opera arias recording and author of the booklet notes. We went about gathering as many of the extant manuscript sources in Italian and European libraries as possible. It was unbelievable to us that so many works of one of the most important composers in the history of music should remain unpublished and unrecorded. Historically and culturally, Scarlatti is in fact in a crucial

position: Perhaps more than any other coeval musician, he contributed significantly to the musical tradition of the 17th century, greatly increasing its potential and thereby inspiring many composers who would later be the leading artists of their time. It's impossible for me to underestimate the importance of Alessandro Scarlatti in my research.

I see in the booklet that the recording was made in connection with the Centro Studi e Ricerche sulla Musica delle Età Barocca e Classica.

It's a center for research into the music of the Baroque and early Classical periods; Concerto de' Cavalieri has been resident there since 2005 and is now involved in a project to bring the Roman musical heritage of the 17th and 18th centuries back to life. The recording of Scarlatti's opera arias, as well as the entire project on Italian Baroque opera, has had the support of the Centro.

Of course, Neapolitan opera in general exerted such a tremendous influence on Baroque music—the operas of Handel and Hasse, for example, would be inconceivable without the precedent set by Scarlatti. I take it from your enthusiasm for Scarlatti that you have more music of his to be recorded—a complete opera, perhaps?

I was thinking too of how much Handel owes Scarlatti for his operatic success, and of how much his music draws on the works of the older Italian master. As for eventual new releases of Scarlatti, the idea of recording a complete opera is enticing, but there are also many other sections of the catalog that deserve to be brought to light with concrete projects.

That naturally leads to another question—how about venturing outside of Italy? A lot of people do Handel, but the operas of Hasse, for example, have hardly been touched.

In concert we do play the other great 18th-century composers, as for example Hasse. His music will be part of a program of secular cantatas we are going to present later this year, which could also be recorded. Regarding opera, however, in the immediate future we want to stick with the Italian repertoire. The recording of Scarlatti's opera arias and symphonies in fact represents the first volume of an 18th-century Italian opera project; the second volume will be devoted to Pergolesi, again with Daniela Barcellona for Deutsche Harmonia Mundi.

*Considering all the work that goes into editing and performing music such as Scarlatti's, music that hasn't been heard since it was premiered in the early 1700s, do you prefer doing that as opposed to the "greatest hits" of the Baroque? Will Concerto de' Cavalieri ever record *Le Quattro Stagioni*, for example?*

Of course we will! When I said that the goal of Concerto de' Cavalieri was to progress through the repertoire, this means exploring the great works as well. I'm convinced that both premieres and "greatest hits" are essential parts of the life of a musician. Being devoted to music that hasn't been heard before gives the great satisfaction of contributing to the increase and systematization of knowledge. On the other hand, recording a famous masterpiece such as *Le Quattro Stagioni* means that we have the

opportunity to discover new interpretive solutions among the seemingly inexhaustible possibilities for this work.

Your soloist on the second CD, Daniela Barcellona, has quite a following in Europe, but I confess that this is the first I've heard her work. How did you hook up with her?

It was Mario Marcarini who had the idea of involving Daniela Barcellona, when we first developed the idea of a recording project with Deutsche Harmonia Mundi/Sony. In our opinion she is the ideal soloist for this music, both for the outstanding quality of her voice and for her perfect technique, which enables her to express all the diverse affections of the music. Teaming up with Daniela Barcellona has been amazing and I'm really happy to go forward with this operatic project, together with her and her husband, Alessandro Vitiello, who prepared the variations and significantly contributed to the successful outcome of the recording.

The arias on the Deutsche Harmonia Mundi CD are taken from later operas by Scarlatti andare mostly for castrato—I presume they were intended for Farinelli. How about the soprano arias? I'm thinking especially of those with trumpet solo, which would be logical since you have such a wonderful trumpet player at your disposal. Su le sponde del Tebro is one possibility.

Actually, we've already recorded *Su le sponde del Tebro* with Gabriele Cassone on trumpet and Adriana Fernandez, part of a program of Alessandro Scarlatti's secular cantatas—that should be released by the end of the year. The operatic arias for soprano and trumpet are marvelously written, charged with stormy emotions; they're just waiting to be brought back to life. I fully share your enthusiasm for trumpet music: In my opinion, the natural trumpet is able, as no other instrument, to evoke suggestions of archaic epochs from within the Baroque. For the foreseeable future I intend to keep on with the trumpet repertoire.

I'm glad to hear that you've made another recording with Fernandez; she was excellent on the first CD. I was wondering, though—do you also give live concerts, and if so, what is your home base?

Of course, Concerto de' Cavalieri gives live concerts at festivals and venues throughout Italy and abroad, and as mentioned, since 2005 its home base has been in Rome at the Centro Studi e Ricerche sulla Musica delle Età Barocca e Classica, where, apart from being involved in musicological projects, the orchestra usually rehearses.

So you actually rehearse and perform at the Centro. How is that connected with the Auditorium Parco della Musica shown in the booklet?

The Parco della Musica is separate; it's the main auditorium of Rome, a multifunctional complex with concert halls, studios, and other facilities that hosts musical and cultural events. It's also the seat of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia. It's mentioned in the booklet, because that's where we usually make our recordings.

Where have you performed outside of Italy?

Concerto de' Cavalieri began concertizing outside of Italy a relatively short time ago, but already we've performed in several places in Europe and the Middle East. The success of our recordings has helped greatly to increase our international contacts.

Any plans to visit North America?

This is what is meant by "international contacts." In the near future, I hope to expand our activity to America and Far East, as well as consolidating our European contacts.

You should consider performing at the Boston Early Music Festival in 2013. You'd make quite a splash, especially if you bring your trumpet players.

We should indeed! That would be really a great opportunity to start performing in America.