

Fierce Joy and Proof That It Happened

Libby Potter Boss

In my CD collection is a set of two semi-bootlegged discs, their cases held together with a rubber band, each marked *La Pietà*, 1/21/01 in permanent marker. The recording itself is perfectly legal; I arranged for it with an ebullient phone contact at NPR's "Performance Today," along with recordings of several other concerts on the "Chamber Music in Historic Sites" schedule that season. That I ended up with a copy of it is sheer luck, or divine intervention, or chutzpah. The music is a French-Canadian all-girl band, playing music written for young women, and it is my favorite CD.

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I grew up playing Suzuki method violin, which is something like a religion. ("Only practice on the days you eat" is one of the figurative rosary beads.) My violin teacher signed several of us up for the Utah Symphony Youth Guild; and as a Youth Guild member, I spent a lot of weekends checking coats at concerts, slipping in to hear the performance during the applause after the first piece. This, too, was like a religion, complete with a high priest in white tie and tails and a worshipful congregation of mostly gray-haired disciples. The music was grand, self-important, established, fundamental. Only years later would I realize that it was actually very young, that the idea of the civic orchestra, complete with large numbers of paid performers, is roughly the same age as the United States of America. Its Important Composers are newcomers, too. Mozart was a contemporary of George Washington. Shostakovich died two days before my third birthday.

My best friend and I, the angry feminists of the seventh grade,

sat in this gold-leaf temple celebrating old male composers wearing wigs and counted the women on the stage. A few violinists and violists, flutists, always a female harpist. The percussion section and double bass players were exclusively male. Not once in years of guest conductors did we see a woman hold the baton or hear music written by a woman—not even the short contemporary pieces that we missed because they showed up on the first part of the program, while we were still collecting coats.

It didn't add up. We performed violin/piano duets regularly, mostly in our own wards' sacrament meetings but occasionally in a random ward where the bishop knew our families and was tired of a weekly congregational hymn. There, we would sit on the stand, obvious visitors, keenly aware that our talent carried with it a kind of authority that granted two tweenish girls in velvet dresses and our first high heels access to the realm of graying men in charcoal suits. We spent several weeks every summer at rigorous music camps, always surrounded by other girls. (The sole male flutist we knew, a good-looking blond guy built like a full-back, got equal measures of awe and teasing.) The best musicians we knew were girls. So we watched the stage and asked, *Where are all the women?*

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Twenty-five years later, the scene inside concert halls around the world has changed little. There are more women performing in orchestras, thanks to the widespread practice of blind auditions. The musicians literally play behind a screen, and walk on and off the stage on thick carpet to mute the distinctive tapping of high heels. It took a government order to integrate the Vienna Philharmonic—in 1993. Yet not a single top-tier American orchestra is led by a female conductor. Marin Alsop, despite appearing regularly as a guest conductor with the Philadelphia Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and the London Symphony, makes her artistic home at the second-tier Baltimore Symphony; her colleague JoAnn Falletta leads the perennially struggling Buffalo Philharmonic.

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The occasion for the La Pietà concert was the seventy-fifth anniversary of Mount St. Mary's College, the Catholic women's col-

lege in Los Angeles that houses the Da Camera Society, where I was working as the marketing manager—a bit of a misnomer: We had a staff of exactly seven people, and I was the entire marketing department.

The concert was a collection of music written for young women, including a sinfonia and several concerti by Vivaldi, who wrote them as *maestro di violino* at a girls' orphanage in Venice that was famed for its music; the young ladies performed behind a screen or grate for the sake of modesty, playing for paying tourists as well as for men who had come to the orphanage seeking wives. The chamber orchestra La Pietà takes its name from this orphanage, and each of its twelve women wears something red in honor of Vivaldi, who was known as the "red priest" for the color of his hair. Also on the program was a suite Gustav Holst wrote for his students at St. Paul's Girls' School in Hammersmith after complaining, "I get reams of twaddle sent me periodically, and that is all publishers seem to think is suitable for girls."¹ It is a madcap piece, a romp, a constantly accelerating roller-coaster ride that ends at a gleeful sprint.

La Pietà had already produced three best-selling CDs, but tours are usually a chamber group's bread and butter, and this was their first tour. The logistics were overwhelming. Not only was there the normal problem of arranging for twelve women, their instruments, and their luggage to be in the same city (and preferably in the same hotel) at the same time, with the solo violinist arriving as early as possible before each concert to allow for media appearances, but there was also the timeless problem faced by a large group of women in their twenties and thirties. Most of them were mothers of small children, and elaborate child-care arrangements had to be executed in their absence.

Aside from the logistical details, the tour had the air of a stolen girls' weekend. The musicians' collective excitement came through in the performance as a buoyancy, an enthusiasm, a highly contagious virus of *joie de vivre*. A reviewer from the *Los Angeles Times* wrote that they played with "fierce joy."² Our artistic director, unfortunately, read their joy as a lack of professionalism and mentally filed them in the same distasteful category as the

Eroica Trio, another all-girl band known for their low-cut gowns and sensual on-stage affectations.

The audience members, in contrast, were entranced. On their feet, they demanded not one but two encores.

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And then consider the case of a Milanese composer born over four hundred years ago. Northern Italy in the early seventeenth century was a dangerous and unstable place. Margarita Cozzolani was born in 1602 into a city whose prosperity had earned it the wrong kind of attention. During the previous two centuries, rule of the city-state had passed through warring Italian families, the Spanish, and the Austrian Hapsburgs; eventually the political upheaval led to economic decline, and families of standing began to disinherit younger sons in the interests of keeping the family wealth in a single pair of hands. Daughters of these families, whose marriage dowries could be a significant drain on financial resources, were more likely to be placed in convents than married off.

Young women of wealthy households brought with them the interests and talents that had been cultivated by their parents—interests that would not have been easily continued after marriage—and several of the cloisters began to be known for their music. Cozzolani, a gifted singer, entered the convent of Santa Radegonda when she was seventeen, taking the religious name Chiara (“clear”) to complement her given name (literally, “pearl”). Twenty years later she would publish the first of her four known groups of compositions, only two of which survive in their entirety.

Milanese writer Filippo Picinelli described the fame of Cozzolani’s convent: “The nuns of Santa Radegonda of Milan are gifted with such rare and exquisite talents in music that they are acknowledged to be the best singers of Italy. They wear the Cassinese habits of [the order of] St. Benedict, but under their black garb they seem to any listener to be white and melodious swans, who fill hearts with wonder, and enrapture tongues in their praise. Among these sisters, Donna Chiara Margarita Cozzolani merits the highest praise, Chiara in name but even more so in

merit, and Margarita for her unusual and excellent nobility of invention.”³

So this was a particular moment, a particular opportunity in a unique time and place, where a few fortunate women were able to express themselves musically. The popularity and widespread use of the printing press meant that, with some money, they could even publish their music. The first sacred choral music written by a woman to appear in print was written by Raffaella Aleotti, another nun, and was published in 1593, just a few years before Cozzolani’s birth.⁴ Even the turmoil of the times, which included not just political and financial upheaval but also the Black Death (bubonic plague), which killed nearly half the Milanese population between 1629 and 1630, may have led to a relaxation of Church rule over the convents; the nuns not only sang their music but also, for a time, were allowed musical instruments to serve as accompaniment, which resulted in ever more complex harmonies and forms.

The window was narrow. Cozzolani published for only ten years, though she was one of more than a dozen religious women in the region who did so. Later in life, as prioress and then abbess of her house, Cozzolani would battle with the archbishop of Milan over the nuns’ right to perform their music—and, indeed, have contact of any form with the world outside their walls. I do not know what was in her heart when she and her sisters sang the *alleluias* at the end of her “Ave mater dilectissima,” a dialogue between the risen Christ and his mother contained in her *Messa Paschale*. I cannot imagine it to be less than the “fierce joy” of the women of La Pietà.

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The *Messa Paschale*, written early in what we call the Baroque period (the name was not used until early in the twentieth century), retains much of the sustained polyphony of the music of the Renaissance, my own favorite music. A friend commented a few years ago that she knew I would love Boston because it has “such a great early music scene.” Early music the *Messa Paschale* is, but its form is decidedly forward-looking, anticipating the mathematical structures that Bach would write nearly a century later. The instrumentation is built on a basso continuo part: a mainstay in Ba-

roque music, the sustained low notes on which the more intricate (or “baroque”) variations are constructed. The low bass could be played by any instrument in the register, from organ or harpsichord to viola da gamba (a kind of second cousin once removed to the cello and double bass), and provided a depth to the music that the nuns’ high voices would have lacked. Though Cozzolani’s published vocal scores include a bass line, it is almost certain that the nuns sang it an octave higher than written; the score, after all, was intended for the public at large.

There are even passages of the music that remind me of the *concerti* Vivaldi wrote for his students, which is logical. The “red priest” certainly would have known of Cozzolani, whose fame had spread throughout the Italian peninsula and who had died the year before he was born in a city just 225 miles away.

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When I emailed Angèle Dubeau, the leader and soloist of La Pietà, to let her know that NPR had asked to record her ensemble, she replied with an unusual question: Could the group have a copy of the recording? I passed along the request to my contact at NPR, who after only a slight pause, said that yes, it would be fine to make an unofficial copy of the tape for the group—it was their music, after all—provided they not release it to the public. It also had to be done quickly; he intended to air it the following week, and he had to allow enough time for editing.

The day after the concert, I took the digital tape to a studio on Santa Monica Boulevard which had promised same-day transfer to CD; that afternoon I would FedEx the tape to Washington, D.C., and the CDs to Montreal. When I handed over the tape, I found myself asking for two copies. The experience of a performance occurs just once, in a particular place and time; but a recorded disc, like a printed folio, is tangible evidence that it did happen, and that it can happen again.

*To listen to Chiara Margarita Cozzolani’s music,
visit The Cozzolani Project at <http://www.cozzolani.com>.*

Notes

1. Imogen Holst, *Gustav Holst: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 27.

2. John Henken, "La Pietà Seasoned in Vivaldi, Other String Pieces," *Los Angeles Times*, January 23, 2001.

3. Filippo Picinelli, *Ateneo dei letterati milanesi* (Milan, Italy: F. Vigone, 1670), 147, <http://books.google.com/books?id=eTJPAAAAcAAJ&dq> (accessed May 5, 2012).

4. Suzanne G. Cusick, "Aleotti, Raffaella," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2d ed., edited by Stanley Sadie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1:350–51.