

Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Innsbruck Festival of Early Music, 2023 An Abundance of Riches

The roots of the revered Innsbruck Festival of Early Music, which just concluded its 47th season, go all the way back to 1963 when concerts first began to be performed at the exquisite Schloss Ambras just outside of the city. The Festival itself was established in 1976, and, beginning the following year with a performance of Handel's *Acis and Galatea*, the centerpiece had always been at least one baroque opera or oratorio. This year, it was both, Vivaldi's engaging late opera *L'Olimpiade* (reviewed separately) and his only surviving oratorio, *Juditha triumphans*, both led by departing Artistic Director, Alessandro De Marchi at the Tiroler Landestheater. In concluding his 14th year, his wish had been for a comprehensive Vivaldi season, and that he got, indeed orchestrated, and it all went well beyond these two stunning centerpieces to include, in the now greatly expanded Festival, a plethora of concerts, recitals, and sacred music by both Vivaldi and his contemporaries, scattered through the month-long Festival in various venues.



The Schloss Ambras

Photo: Richard B. Beams

The Concerto Italiano at the Jesuitenkirche

One of these was a concert in the Jesuitenkirche, Innsbruck's central church, by the esteemed visiting baroque specialist Rinaldo Alessandrini and his Concerto Italiano. This ensemble has recorded many of Vivaldi's chamber works for strings for the ambitious Vivaldi Edition, a project



Marianne Beate Kieland; Members of the Concerto Italiano
Photo: Johanna Pissarek

that has also assiduously recorded the critical editions of many operas by Vivaldi. The concert itself began with some of these, followed by brief Latin motets by Vivaldi's contemporaries, Antonio Caldara and Baldassara Galuppo, and then concluded with an enticing performance of Vivaldi's beautiful *Stabat mater*.

One might have thought the chamber writing for strings would have become lost in the spacious Jesuitenkirche, frequently used for both liturgical and artistic activities. But such was not the case. Indeed, Alessandrini's expertise was immediately on display as he shaped the subtle dissonances and expressive cantabile elements in the modest writing for strings of the opening number, *Concerto madrigalesc* in d minor, RV 129, so named in part for its unconventional four movement structure. Its quiet tone matched that of the *Stabat mater* well, creating a somber frame for the program.

After the opening concerto, the rapt audience was in for a jolt with the sudden burst of three fortissimo chords in the strings introducing the next number, Vivaldi's motet *Longe male, umbrae, terrors* (Away with woes, shadows, terrors), also

in d minor. Norwegian mezzo-soprano Marianne Beate Kieland joined the group for this stunning miniature drama per musica. The technically accomplished and expressive mezzo-soprano sallied forth into the first movement, an Allegro ma poco, with fluid and exhilarating fioratura. She was simply thrilling. With the closing Largo, calling for the radiance of heaven, the yearning strings softened, and her warm, rich lower register made her legato sequences especially poignant. A final jubilant Allegro ended the enthralling work.

Vivaldi's *Stabat mater*, a miniature gem

Vivaldi's *Stabat mater* closing the program might have been anticlimactic following the other pieces, especially without an intermission. What came through, however, was the great tragedy and Italianate beauty of this work in f minor, generally slow and melancholy with an Allegro only for the final Amen. This, Vivaldi's first sacred work, written in 1712 just a year before his first opera, is indeed one of his greatest and most compact works (using only the first ten stanzas of the well-known Latin hymn).

Last year in Boston, Maestro Alessandrini conducted the *Stabat mater* of the lesser-known baroque contemporary, Antonio Bononcini for the Handel & Haydn society. In his program notes for that performance, he stressed that emphasis should be given to each Latin word, with depth and special attention to each vowel. Likewise, Vivaldi's *Stabat mater* in Innsbruck acquired richness and meaning, with the careful attention to both text and writing for strings evidenced throughout the whole concert. It was mesmerizing, and this little jewel of a concert served also to illustrate the quality, and variety of such offerings at the Festival.



Francesca Aspromonte as “La Primadonna,” Francesca Cuzzoni
Photo: Mona Wibmer

“La primadonna” at Schloss Ambras

Indeed, the following night, the only other concert I was able to attend was another stunning evening, this time in the elegant setting of the ornate Spanish Hall of Schloss Ambras, always a prime venue for the Festival. In a concert, titled “La primadonna,” the talented young Italian soprano Francesca Aspromonte assumed the role of Handel’s famous primadonna for the Royal Academy of Music of the 1720’s, Francesca Cuzzoni, one of the first truly great primadonnas, with a notoriously fiery temper to match.

Surprisingly Ms. Aspromonte did not sing any Handel but instead mostly a varied assortment of *Cantate da Camera* by Cuzzoni’s lifetime companion, composer and harpsichordist Pietro Giuseppe Sandoni (1683-1748) who had brought her to London from Venice (Vivaldi territory) and with whom she later often performed. The refined Basel-based ensemble La Floridiana accompanied her, led by harpsichordist Nicoleta Paraschivescu.

The two of them filled the gap between her vocal numbers: the string ensemble with four *Sinfonia a quarto* by their Italian contemporary Benetto Marcello (1688-1739), and Ms. Paraschivescu with a scintillating solo *Prelude and Ciaccone* by Sandoni on the harpsichord.

But the evening really belonged to Ms. Aspromonte who played the primadonna role to the hilt, with an energized presence (sans fiery temper). Like that of Cuzzoni three centuries ago, her expressive tone and virtuoso technique were evident right from the start. In the slow movement of her opening double aria by Sandoni, Ms. Aspromonte’s graceful and expressive tone captivated, even more so in the da capo. Then, with the fluid bravado of the Allegro movement, she displayed the ease of ornamentation that she would demonstrate throughout the concert. Continuing with a variety of numbers - a lilting siciliano, a pathetic serioso aria, a playfully comic scena - Ms. Aspromonte wowed the audience as much as she had those at the Festival in 2018 (including me) in Hasse’s *Semele*.



A view of the lovely grounds at the Schloss Ambras
Photo: Richard B. Beams

And so I was reminded that it had been just a couple of weeks before this night that the Innsbruck Festival of Early Music had ceremonially opened at Schloss Ambras for the concluding Festival of Maestro De Marchi's extraordinary 14-year stewardship. As noted by the press office, he had concluded his remarks to the audience as follows:

They were very formative and wonderful years that I was able to spend here. I'm very grateful for that, and I'm looking forward to the coming weeks when we'll walk a bit through music history together one last time – especially with Vivaldi.

Lucky were those who could enjoy the full journey through the festival with him - and lucky me to at least have enjoyed a small part of it.

A Fond Farewell to Artistic Director Alessandro De Marchi

The Schloss Ambras, with its hidden grotto, gardens, and recessed waterfall, is always a delightful place to stroll beforehand, as I did. Happily so, since by evening's end, a *gran temporale* had settled in, of the sort Innsbruck is used to on occasion, stranding the audience inside until the tempestuous downpour, bolts of lightning and thunder abated enough to exit (which still wasn't easily done). But during the intermission, while it was still balmy and beautiful, I had noticed the Festival's ubiquitous Artistic Director, Alessandro De Marchi, chatting quietly outside the castle.



Artistic Director Alessandro De Marchi
Photo: Kiran West