

# Handel and Haydn Society soars in Pergolesi's "Stabat Mater"

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Rinaldo Alessandrini led the Handel and Haydn Society in Pergolesi's "Stabat Mater" and other works Friday night at Jordan Hall.

There are few works of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century that proved as influential and instantly popular as Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*. Written in 1736 — the year of the composer's death at age 26 from tuberculosis — its blend of the intimate and operatic, musical ingenuity, and depth and intensity of expression captured the imagination of the public and the Italian composer's colleagues, including J.S. Bach among others.

Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* was the major work on a nicely varied program presented by the Handel and Haydn Society Friday night at Jordan Hall led by guest conductor Rinaldo Alessandrini.

One can go a long time indeed without hearing advocacy of this celebrated masterwork performed on this level. In his first Handel and Haydn appearance in a decade, Alessandrini more than lived up to his reputation as one of the most skillful and idiomatic of Baroque conductors currently before the public.

Rarely will one hear this work's varied spiritual elements from stark melancholy to frenzied jubilation conveyed with such vitality and natural eloquence. Directing the singers and ensemble with his restless and communicative body language, Alessandrini seemed to physically

draw the essence of the music from the two soloists and H&H ensemble.

Period purists might object that male soprano and alto voices should have been employed for historical verisimilitude. But given the magnificent advocacy of the two female soloists, few could have reason for complaint.

Soprano Liesbeth Devos and mezzo-soprano Emily Righter brought uncommon vocal gleam as well as flexibility and a stark emotional connection to the text. Righter's dark, refulgent tone was most affecting in *Quis non posset contristari*. Both singers gracefully handled the leaping coloratura of *Fac, ut ardeat cor meum* and rose to the impassioned spiritual elevation of *Sancta Mater* with full dedication. The penultimate section, *Inflamatus et accentus* went with immense spirit and lift and the concluding *Quando corpus morietur* made the plaintive, touching return to the elegiac opening.

Alessandrini's stylish direction provided a virtual seminar in Baroque conducting. The Italian musician led the ensemble with firmly pointed accents and bracing rhythms yet gave the expressive passages ample room to breathe within a flowing overall structure.

The first half of the concert, offering shorter works in the contemporary "Italian" style, was largely on the same high level, with Alessandrini leading deftly from the harpsichord.

Geminiani remains one of the most innovative of Italian composers for strings yet his music still remains strangely underperformed.

Geminiani's lively Concerto Grosso in E minor, Op. 3, no. 3 led off the evening in vigorous style, given sharp accents and rhythmic kick by Alessandrini and the ensemble, some fleeting errant violin intonation apart.

Devos also appeared in Pergolesi's more concise *Salve Regina* written the same year as the *Stabat Mater*. The soprano was just as impressive in this graceful setting with an ideal blend of pure-toned vocalism, agility and an expressive response to the text. Devos brought a pleading desperation to *Ad te clamamus* and affecting tenderness to *Et Jesum, benedictum*, with Alessandrini and the ensemble providing close and sensitive support.

The Italian conductor also showed himself a fluent instrumentalist in Bach's Harpsichord Concerto No. 3 in D major, BWV 1054. Better known in its original guise as Bach's Violin Concerto in E major, BWV 1042, the

thematically rich music works equally well for keyboard.

Alessandrini proved a polished soloist, a couple brief digital slips apart. He clearly views the keyboard role as *primus inter pares* rather than a boldly projected solo protagonist.

Even so, a more tangible instrument would have made some of the back and forth between soloist and ensemble emerge more clearly. The pingy harpsichord (a 2004 Allan Winkler two-manual instrument based on a 1716 Fleischer single-manual original) sounded muted and unfocused and one wanted a more vibrant, full-bodied sound.