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A female voice florilegium: Vivaldi's *Juditha triumphans* in Paris

In 1701 a 23 year old Antonio Vivaldi was called as a violin and viol (gamba) instructor at the Pio Ospedale della Pietà, a female orphanage in Venice, where he worked until 1720. The girls at the Pio Ospedale were given a thorough musical education, and were well respected both as instrumentalists and as singers. In 1716 Vivaldi became “Maestro di Concerti”, with the responsibility of writing works to be performed by the girls. In the same year, after a long war against the Turks, Venice obtained a crucial victory in Corfu. The “sacred, military oratorio” *Juditha triumphans* was written right after this battle: a clear allegorical choice to celebrate the Venetian defeat of the Turks.



Jean-Christophe Spinosi

It is a large work for five female voices and female chorus, with a musical structure typical of Baroque operas: A-B-A arias alternate with *recitativi secchi*, with a few choral interventions. The libretto, by Giacomo Casseti, is based on the story told in the apocryphal *Book of Judith* of the Bible.

Nebuchadnezzar's army, under the command of general Holofernes, besieges the Jewish city of Bethulia. Judith, a beautiful widow, goes to Holofernes' quarters, seduces him, and cuts his head off

after he falls asleep. The following Jewish counterattack is victorious against the Assyrian troops, missing their leader, and Bethulia is liberated. This story inspired multiple works of arts, the most famous of which – the paintings by Caravaggio and by Artemisia Gentileschi – are among the crowning jewels of Renaissance art.

Marie-Nicole Lemieux was superb in her interpretation of the lead character. Her breath technique was spotless, resulting in a perfect legato, and her mellow, deep timbre managed to convey all the emotions of a resolute, strong woman driven to violence by inescapable circumstances. Juditha has seven arias in the oratorio, which explore a vast range of emotions and of musical effects. Cassetti's libretto describes Juditha as a stately, chaste matron, her seduction of Holofernes is downplayed, and she kills him before anything happens that could taint her reputation. Vivaldi describes her as a noble, strong woman, but not a warrior, as it is evident from the first aria, where she prepares to enter the enemy encampment (*Quo cum Patriae*), a sweet, almost pastoral melody. When she meets Holofernes, she pleads for her city and her people in a seductive aria accompanied with one of Vivaldi's favourite instruments, the viola d'amore, played by conductor Jean-Christophe Spinosi himself. When Holofernes invites to dinner, she begs Abra, her confidante, to follow her, in a ravishing aria (*Veni, me sequere*) with accompaniment of chalumeau, a predecessor of the clarinet, whose duet with Lemieux voice was delightful.



Marie-Nicole Lemieux

Holofernes was Sonia Prina, her contralto is not conventionally pretty, but her coloratura was spotless, and her interpretation, confidence and commitment to the character were irresistible. In the first seduction aria *Nox obscura* she displayed great imagination in the variations, exploring the lower depth of her register, showing originality and panache. Her second seduction aria *Noli o cara*, with oboe and organ *obbligato*, was touching, her wooing of Juditha expressed with her interpretation and her acting.

Vagaus, Holofernes' squire, is not a secondary character: he gets six arias, only one less than the main protagonist. The emotional and musical range is vast, going from the first, sweet description of Juditha to Holofernes, to sweet musings on the beautiful night, to a charming aria where he exhorts the servants to prepare the dinner (*O servi volate*). The orchestration is unusual: only theorbos and harpsichord, in an apotheosis of pizzicato which recalls the quick steps of the servants. Vagaus has

the only aria of this oratorio in real Vivaldian *furore* style, when he discovers the beheaded body of his master: *Armatae face et anguibus*. Ana Maria Labin was brilliant, with great high notes and spectacular coloratura. Her bright, silvery soprano showed a fluttery quality in the top register which rendered it very exciting.

Benedetta Mazzucato sang Abra, Juditha's confidante, with a very well projected, very metallic alto. Her interpretation was heartfelt, and her technique solid. The cast was completed by Dara Savinova as Ozias, the priest, who sang the beautiful aria opening the second part with great competence.

It took a little while to the ensemble to find balance, at the beginning of the concert, but soon they settled under the lead of Spinosi. The Ensemble Matheus gave a fantastic performance, following every little tweak of their leader, in a crescendo of emotion and drama. Their accompaniment of Juditha's aria *Agitata infido flatu* was spectacular, and so was the orchestral description of the beheading of Holofernes. The Choeur Mélisme(s) was precise and absolutely on point in all their interventions, both as the martial soldiers and the terrified virgins of Bethulia.