

A successful crossing

Friday

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By Keith Powers / Correspondent

Heinrich Biber's sonatas create a religion that welcomes all followers. Devotion is the only requirement.

Biber (1644–1704) wrote a cycle of violin sonatas tracing the journey depicted in the Signs of the Cross. Known as the Mystery Sonatas, or the Rosary Sonatas, the works — for solo violin, and continuo — might be a musical footnote if not for their unusual tunings.

Biber did not invent scordatura — the deliberate re-configuration of strings in alternate pitches — but these works are its most notable achievement. Boston Baroque concertmaster Christina Day Martinson performed the entire cycle Friday evening at Jordan Hall.

Biber's music creates a soundtrack for the mysteries of Jesus's life and of Mary's, with the sonatas— from the Annunciation to Mary's coronation in heaven—following the chronology that makes up the saying of the rosary.

Performing the cycle in one evening is a physical marvel. Martinson required six different violins, and a backstage expert to help prepare the tunings. They vary with each of the 15 "mysteries."

The physical challenges in the cycle come from the duration — more than three hours long — and in the form of concentration. The scordatura turns the notes on the page into a kind of tablature — what Martinson was reading in the score does not always translate into the sound the instrument makes.

The virtuosity of the playing rests in the bowing; most of the fingering remains in the violin's first position. That limits the instrument's range, but the tunings deepen and transform the tonal center. The effect really is mysterious: as if the core sound of the violin shifts from sonata to sonata.

Each sonata uses familiar baroque forms: often an introduction, dance movement (gigue, allemande, sarabande), aria, or a theme and variations. Focused on the soloist, the sonatas also have a continuo line (the title page of the manuscript has been lost; thus, the instrumentation is not specified, and up for interpretation).

Here, Boston Baroque music director Martin Pearlman performed on organ or harpsichord, Michael Leopold on theorbo or guitar, Michael Unterman on cello. Violinist Julia McKenzie served as technical assistant, setting the basic tunings backstage.

Martinson played magnificently. Of course there were many missteps — fatigue was a factor, especially in the closing Passacaglia. The virtuosity of the bowing cannot be underestimated. Not in extra-musical ways, but spiccato articulations are everywhere, sautillé, jeté, martelé. Speed and accuracy were necessities. Surprisingly only occasionally — maybe twice — does the score require ponticello. Pizzicato was noted only once — in the fingering hand, during the Ascension sonata (#14).

Each sonata deserves detailed examination, but will not find it in this space. Devotion is an in-the-moment experience, and Martinson provided hours of in-the-moment experiences. Elegant, assured, and understated—here's betting that the modest Martinson herself might have been unsatisfied with her achievement. The listeners weren't.

CADENCES: Large audience at Jordan Hall—not sold out, but a sign of the robustness of the organization. This was an esoteric, demanding concert — not just on the soloist. Rock fans who have marveled that left-handed Jimi Hendrix could play a right-hander's guitar upside-down should take note of this challenge. Not only are the strings tuned differently, but the fingering changes. And the pitch off the page does not match the performer's expectations—like opening your mouth and having a foreign language come out. The continuo on some recordings of the Biber sonatas is unusually beefed up — turning them nearly into duo sonatas. Not here. This accompaniment was tasteful, restrained. Pearlman mentioned that Martinson will record these sonatas for the group's label, Linn Records, in the coming week.

This performance does not repeat. The next Boston Baroque performance will be Handel's Giulio Cesare, with soprano Susanna Phillips and countertenors Lawrence Zazzo and John Holiday, April 21 and 23 at Jordan Hall. bostonbaroque.org; 617-987-8600.

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