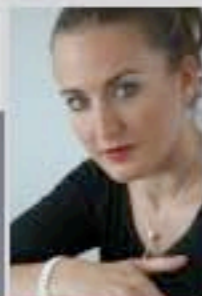




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The 'Other Bartoli'

By Carlo Vitali

MusicalAmerica.com

July 1, 2010

BOLOGNA -- At age 12 she wanted to play the cello, but there wasn't one at home -- just a piano, so she studied that instead. Now she is in her early 30s and finally fulfilling her girlhood dreams, studying viola da gamba at the Venice Conservatory.

In the intervening years, Marina Bartoli has been making a name for herself in early-opera circles, appearing on such highly specialized stages as Spoleto in Italy, Vicenza's Teatro Olimpico, the Rokokotheater at Schwetzingen, Germany, and the Opéra de Nice, as well as in festivals across Europe. Both London's Opera Now and Berlin's Opernwelt have listed her among the most promising talents, for both 2008 and 2009.

"People keep asking me whether I'm a relative to Cecilia Bartoli," she says. "I'm not, although I like her very much. Moreover Cecilia is a mezzo, while I am a soprano -- a 'lirico leggero' or 'lyric coloratura,' according to the traditional fach categories." Actually, with a range of two-and-a-half octaves, from middle C up to the high F, Bartoli can tackle the most taxing roles stipulated by Baroque composers for either women or castrati. I was thunderstruck when I first heard her in 2008 at Vicenza's Teatro Olimpico, where she was singing the trouser role of Ostilio in Vivaldi's "Ottone in villa." What makes the difference is her confidence in producing clarion high tones, always at perfect pitch, as her sterling voice expands above the lower octave -- apparently without strain and as if she commanded an inexhaustible reserve of breath. Add to that fiery coloratura, energetic acting and a pair of large green eyes. She doesn't look typically Italian, by the way -- actually, more Scandinavian.

"Far from that," says Bartoli. "I could well have been born in Africa, as my mother was raised in the then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), where my grandfather -- a lawyer who did some of his coursework in Atlanta, GA -- had settled coming from Padua during the 1950s." He ran a prosperous wine farm there, but was forced to leave in the late 1960s during decolonization. He returned to Italy by sea with his family. "It so happened that my mother fell in love with the board physician and married him. So I was born in Mantua, Italy, the city my father was from."

Bartoli's curriculum vitae is impressive. Piano was just an appetizer. At first, she didn't like mainstream opera that much, but she fell suddenly in love with Mozart's "Exsultate jubilate" after hearing Barbara Bonney sing it on the radio.

"From that moment on, I wanted to be a bel canto singer," she says. "I immediately felt at ease with the extreme coloratura of Handel, Vivaldi and sundry composers of the early 18th century."

After earning a diploma in opera at the C. Pollini Conservatory Padua and a degree in humanities at the university of the same town (her dissertation was about the career of Metaura Torricelli, a 19th-century virtuoso violinist), she continued her advanced training in Switzerland, including studies with Gerd Türk at the Schola Cantorum Basel and with Kathrin

Graf at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater of Zürich. She credits Swiss talent-scout Christoph Boller with helping to launch her career during this time.

Scholarships and stellar grades notwithstanding, she doesn't like to be regarded as an egg-head. She's a modern and attractive young woman, deeply interested in an array of performing arts, from mime through hip-hop to music theater, both professionally and for fun. When she had more spare time, she used to participate in amateur choirs, play the piano in night bars or sing folk and country music in duo with her Californian friend Alison Frantz.

Things changed after July 2006, when she made her "real" grand-style debut in Spoleto Italy, singing the role of Ippolita in Vivaldi's "Ercole sul Termidonte." Since then, she has been increasingly in demand among noted conductors of period bands, such as Gustav Leonhardt, Bob Van Asperen, Philippe Herreweghe, Ottavio Dantone and many others. A close partnership recently has been established with the ensemble "La Venexiana" and its leader Claudio Cavina, who is pulling her back over the historical timeline, to such early opera composers as Monteverdi and Cavalli.

Yet Bartoli's commitment to popular music and lighter genres has not diminished. Besides Monteverdi and Bach, Haydn and Vivaldi, her recital repertoire includes unexpected items from musical theater. "One of my favorite pieces is 'Think of Me' from The Phantom of the Opera. I'm really fond of crossover, that way of thinking about music that makes the American scene so vibrant and stimulating." She has also had several songs written for her, including Paolo Agostini's "Heaven forever," part of the soundtrack for Antonello Belluco's short film "[The Knight.](#)"

Given her talent and versatility, "the other Bartoli," as some have started calling her, might well worry La Cecilia some time soon. As to her U.S. debut, she says, "There are proposals, but nothing certain so far -- let me keep the secret for now."

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