READINGS FOR HIDDEN ITALY
CONCERT, 16 NOVEMBER 2019

Readers
Narrator: Rosemary Hill
Male voice of the period: Mark Niel
(Ercole Bottrigari; Filippo Picinelli; Lazaro Agostino Cotta; Pope Benedict XIII; Giovanni Francesco Loredano; Jean-Jacques Rousseau; Anon)
Female voice of the period: Carly Halse
(Isabella Leonarda; Barbara Strozzi; Margherita Costa; Isabella Andreini)

Running Order
1. Introduction from Mark Jordan: explain Hidden Italy and the readings - the focus on women in Italian baroque music and society. Introduce Cantate Domino. (3 minutes)
2. Monteverdi: Cantate Domino (3 minutes)
3. Reading: Isabella Leonarda, the Muse of Novara (7 minutes)
4. Isabella Leonarda: Magnificat (10 minutes)
   *(Choir leave places in chancel and return to side pews)*
5. Reading: Barbara Strozzi, la virtuosissima cantatrice (7 minutes)
   *(Choir retake their places in the chancel)*
6. Barbara Strozzi: Silentio Nocivo (4 minutes)
7. Reading: Woman, Far from her Lover, and Pregnant (4 minutes)
8. Monteverdi: Beatus Vir (8 minutes)
   *(Choir leave places in chancel and return to side pews)*
9. Reading: Letter on the Birth of Women (5 minutes)
10. Corelli: Trio Sonatas (10 minutes)
    *(Choir retake their places in the chancel)*
11. Reading: The Ospedali of Venice (6 minutes)
12. Vivaldi: Magnificat (17 minutes)

Total running time: 1 hour 34 minutes

Italian names
Italian names should be spoken using Italian pronunciation, rather than an anglicized version.
Introduction by Musical Director

Choir – Monteverdi: Cantate Dominum

Isabella Leonarda, the Muse of Novara

ROSEMARY In Ferrara there once stood the church and convent of San Vito. In the late sixteenth century, the poet Ercole Bottrigari visited San Vito to hear the music of the nuns:

MARK (Ercole Bottrigari) They are indubitably women ... you would see them enter one by one, quietly bringing their instruments, either stringed or wind. They all enter quietly and approach the table without making the least noise and place themselves in their proper place.

Finally, the Maestra of the concert sits down at one end of the table and with a long, slender and well-polished wand, gives them without noise several signs to begin, and then continues by beating the measure of the time which they must obey in singing and playing.

It is not all new. If I were to speak of tens and twenties of years I would not be mistaken. Because of this, in great part, one can understand how the great perfection of their work comes about. No musician or living man has had any part either in their work or in advising them, and so it is all the more marvellous, even stupendous, to everyone who delights in music.

ROSEMARY San Vito was one of many Italian convents where music flourished from the 16th to the 18th century. In Milan, the convent of Santa Radegonda produced the finest in the city. As one Filippo Picinelli wrote in 1670:

MARK (Filippo Picinelli) The nuns of Santa Radegonda are so endowed with such rare exquisiteness in the realm of music that they are recognised as the finest singers in Italy.

Dressed in the black habits of their order, they seem to be as pure and harmonious swans who fill hearts with wonder and draw praise from every tongue.

ROSEMARY This was Isabella Leonarda’s world. She composed her music in the convent of Sant’Orsola in Novara, a small city to the west of Milan.

Isabella was born in 1620 to a prominent family of the city. She was to become the most prolific of the many nuns of her era who composed music. By her death in 1704, she had published more than 200 compositions.

Isabella entered her convent aged just 16. Her religious career prospered. She is identified as ‘madre’ at the age of 56, and ‘superiora’ ten years later, probably the most senior post in the convent.

Isabella’s works carry a double dedication: one to an influential figure who might serve the interests of the convent, and the other to the Virgin Mary:
CARLY (Isabella Leonarda)  Most Blessed Virgin, in my labours I sought no other end than to honour your son and you. I declare to you, Most Holy Mother, that I publish this music not to gain credit in the world, but so that all shall know of my devotion to you.

If this music does not please the world, it is enough that it should please you, who cares more for the heart than for any talent I might have.

ROSEMARY  Three years before Isabella’s death, a kind of Who’s Who of Novara was published. She is one of the few women to have an entry:

MARK (Lazar Agostino Cotta)  Just as Novara has had famous men in all the professions … she also has not lacked highly gifted women who have brought fame to the city. Amongst these is one whose illustrious name shines out, Isabella Leonarda, who, by her singular talent in the art of Music, could rightly be called the Muse of Novara.

She combines uncommon invention, universal genius, a gift for the expression of feeling, a wealth of ideas, a fundamental understanding of theory, and all these lead her to desire perfection in her art.

ROSEMARY  As Isabella flourished in Novara, forces were gathering that would threaten the rich musical world of the convents. The reformation provoked the counter-reformation. The catholic authorities clamped down.

Music in the liturgy was to be strictly curtailed: there was to be no more ‘figured chant’ – what today we call singing in harmony. Only the single melodic line of plainchant was to be tolerated.

Yet there was quiet resistance. In Milan, the church authorities made repeated attempts to clamp down, but the nuns of Santa Radegonda remained a thorn in their side. Hence this edict from Pope Benedict XIII, in 1728:

MARK (Pope Benedict XIII)  They are accustomed to sing music of figured type, and to introduce, besides the organ, instruments of various types, which introduce secular melodies. Because of this practice, time is taken to learn this music, and whole days are taken away from prayer …

… in order that this abuse might be cut at the very roots … we set these rules concerning music. Never more, and at no time in the future may anyone - for any reason - cause, excuse, or make use of figured music, or dare to introduce musical instruments into the church and choir.

Anyone who might do such a thing or dare to disobey this edict will suffer the punishment of interdict of the Church, under the disabilities and threats of excommunication.

CARLY  But Isabella’s music survives.

… Straight into …

Choir – Leonarda, Magnificat

Choir leave places in chancel and return to side pews
Barbara Strozzi, la virtuosissima cantatrice

ROSEMARY

Born in Venice only a year before Isabella Leonarda, Barbara Strozzi’s life could not have been more different. Her father Giulio, a celebrated poet, librettist and intellectual, might have sent her to a convent: it was the destiny of many young women from families who could afford the dowry demanded by religious orders. If not the convent, then marriage, with a dowry of course, was the alternative for most daughters.

No dowry was ever paid for Barbara. By the time she is sixteen, she is singing for her father’s intellectual circle. Her voice draws comparison to the sounds of the harmonies of the spheres. She is:

MARK (Anon)

La Virtuosissima Cantatrice di Giulio Strozzi

ROSEMARY

Giulio Strozzi’s most virtuosic singer.

Barbara is a precocious talent, and Giulio knows it. He sends her to Francesco Cavalli, second only to Monteverdi in the world of Venetian music, to be taught composition. Giulio wants to display Barbara’s talents. Across Italy, political and literary life is sustained by academies, where philosophers, poets, musicians, historians and clerics meet to debate and display.

Giulio is already a leading light in the most important academy in Venice.

For Barbara, he sets up a new academy in his own house. It is to be a laboratory for musical and literary experiment.

Barbara is the mistress of ceremonies. She sings. She performs her own songs, often settings of her father’s poems. Unrequited love is the dominant theme. She suggests subjects for debate, she judges the quality of contributions; she awards prizes.

Some of the debates are published. One is on the question: are tears or song the more potent weapon in love? Barbara reads arguments on both sides. She is the mouthpiece for members of the academy. She is nineteen at this point. They conclude in favour of song. Barbara agrees. She tells them:

CARLY (Barbara Strozzi)

I do not question your decision, gentlemen, in favour of song; for well do I know that I would not have received the honour of your presence at our last session had I invited you to see me cry rather than hear me sing.

ROSEMARY

Barbara is the only woman in the room. Perhaps her mother Isabella is elsewhere in the house. She is Giulio’s long-standing servant. Although she and Giulio never marry, Isabella is named as his heir. And if she dies before Giulio, Barbara will inherit all.

Of course, there is gossip about Barbara. Tongues wag. Who is the new academy really for? For Barbara or the gentlemen? Someone reads that Barbara has handed out flowers to the members of the academy. He can’t resist:

MARK (Anon)

It is a fine thing to distribute the flowers after having already surrendered the fruit.
When she is no more than 20, Barbara’s portrait is painted. She holds a viola da gamba. There is a violin by her on the table. A songbook is open showing the music for a duet. One of Barbara’s breasts is exposed.

But Barbara survives the gossip. At 23, she publishes her first volume of music. It is dedicated to the Grand Duchess of Tuscany. Barbara knows what she faces. She addresses the Duchess:

I most reverently consecrate this first work, which as a woman I publish all too boldly, to the Most August Name of Your Highness, so that it may rest secure against the lightning bolts of slander prepared for it.

By this time, Barbara has given birth to two of her four children, perhaps three. Their father is Giovanni Paolo Vidman, a friend of Barbara’s father, Giulio.

But Barbara is no toy in the hands of men. She has already lent Giovanni Paolo a large sum of money. Giovanni Paolo dies when Barbara is 27, and the debt is repaid with interest. She is financially independent.

When Venice needs money to finance its wars against the Turks, she is taxed and appeals to the Doge against the levy.

She pleads poverty:

I am persuaded that if the Most Excellent Tax Assessors had reflected with justice that I have four children in addition to my aged mother and on my miserable fortunes, this harassment never would have occurred. I do not have anything listed in the property tax rolls, and God only knows that if the little interest that comes to me was lacking, I would surely have to beg for my sustenance from some other charity.

Barbara, like Isabella Leonarda, survived what life threw at her. She died aged 58, in 1677. She left eight published volumes of music containing over a hundred songs and cantatas. Her music was admired then, as it is admired today. One distinguished Venetian said of her:

Had she been born in another era, she would certainly have usurped or enlarged the place of the muses.

*Choir retake their places in the chancel*

*Choir - Strozzi: Silentio Nocivo*
Woman, Far From Her Lover, and Pregnant

ROSEMARY

Margherita Costa was a singer, poet, and playwright of the 17th century. When she was born and when she died, we do not know. She trained as a singer in Rome. She was well known and admired for her performances. At least one opera was written for her.

Like Barbara Strozzi, she was the subject of salacious gossip and deemed immoral simply by virtue of her profession. Yet she sang for the nobility. In 1628, she left Rome for Florence where she sang in the festivities for the marriage of the sister of the Grand Duke, Ferdinando de Medici. We know she had two children. Whether she married is uncertain, but she did have a long relationship with a celebrated actor in the service of the Grand Duke.

Margherita published 12 volumes of poems, plays and letters. Many of her poems record the experience of women and their relationship with men. She wrote, for the first time in Italian literature as far as we know, of the experience of a woman expecting an illegitimate child, fearing for her own and her baby’s destiny.

Typical of the period, Margherita’s poems are full of classical references. Here she mentions Ascanio, the son of Aeneas, who lost his inheritance when Troy was destroyed.

CARLY
(Margherita Costa)

Thus in my womb, this memento in place,
formed from your viscera and my delight,
loosens my rein on tears, lets pain increase,
has me scatter my words to the winds’ flight.
When I think he, in sweeter ambience,
should greet his trials and toils, his own by right,
I weep for the innocent’s anguished life,
for my distress, for yours, his father’s strife.
I am disturbed, while I yearn for this boy,
to have to give birth to him on this soil;
a new Ascanio, mid fires of Troy,
denied by you his every good by will.
I pray that on my breast, newborn, he’ll die
so I’ll not see him bound in greater ill,
and when, oh God, within my womb I feel him,
child do I call him of my every harm.
Ah, what misfortune and what bitter fate
makes me mother to misfortunate son?
What pleased the Heavens to alter my state?
What luck, bent on my peril, led me on?
Oh poor innocent, you are born for what?
To counsel you in life, who'll be the one?
Your mother leaves you, proves to be your rebel.
From father you’re cut off by a star cruel.
Unhappy orphan, where then are they gone,
those things of grandeur you would gladly know?

*Straight into ... (or pause for applause?)*

**Choir – Monteverdi: Beatus Vir**

*Choir leave places in chancel and return to side pews*
Letter on the Birth of Women

ROSEMARY

Isabella Andreini was the leading Italian actress of the baroque era. She was a manager and performer in the celebrated Gelosi theatre company that toured the great aristocratic houses of Italy and France.

Isabella was also a renowned dramatist, poet and intellectual. After her death at the age of just 42, her husband published her collected letters, many of them in defence of women.

This comes from a letter to a gentleman of Isabella’s acquaintance. We only know him as Mr N.

CARLY
(Isabella Andreini)

It was with great pleasure that I heard that Mrs. N., your wife, has given birth to a very beautiful daughter, who, as she grows in beauty (as is to be expected), will be perfect in body and soul.

But as much as I rejoiced over this happy event, I was grieved by your unjust sadness. I was told that you are upset because a daughter was born to you, almost as if by being such, she was not your flesh, your blood and your bones, as much as a son would be; and is it possible that a man of such great experience as you would not want to accept with a joyful heart that which is sent to you by God the most wise, Maker of all things?

Do you not know that, according to the common opinion of learned men, there are more women than men in this world? This is a clear sign of feminine perfection, since the eternal and unerring Divine Providence always delights in adorning with its principal and clearest splendour this beautiful machine that is our world.

So, why be so saddened, since your daughter was born not only to increase the numbers of this very perfect sex, but also (who knows) to make you, in time, a very happy father? Why desire a boy against the wish of heaven that works always for the best?

Oh, how many fathers there were, and still are, very unhappy and miserable on account of their male children? How many houses, how many families have been impoverished, disgraced and desolated by their doing?

The patient women are happy to live under that subjection into which they are born and to lead a regimented and modest life; they contentedly regard the limited confines of their houses as a sweet prison, enjoying the continuous servitude; it does not burden them to be subjected to the strict command of others; it does not displease them to live in constant fear.

How many women are there who, to obey the will of their parents, lock themselves up forever within solitary walls without protest? And how many women are there who, having to submit their neck to the marital yoke in order not to displease others, without any contradictions, marry a man who deserved to die before being born? And with what patience do they later bear the greatest part of the unbearable faults of their husbands?
Oh how many men are there who, yearning to have male offspring and having obtained them, desire and obtain either their death or their ruin? There are infinite examples that I won’t mention in order not to be verbose. It is enough to say that girls, all or most, bring happiness and honour to their families.

Therefore console yourself, celebrate the birth of this daughter of yours, who, I hope, will bring you infinite joy. I kiss your hands and pray to God that through his kindness He will give us a long life, so that we can enjoy the many and marvellous actions of your daughter.

Players – Corelli Trio Sonatas

Choir retake their places in the chancel
The Ospedali of Venice

ROSEMARY  No-one could describe Vivaldi as a hidden composer. But few know that some of his most famous music was written to be performed by women.

In 1743, the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau served as a secretary to the French ambassador to Venice. There he encountered Venetian music in all its richness, and fell in love with it.

MARK (J-J Rousseau)  I had brought with me from Paris the prejudice of that city against Italian music; but I had also received from nature a sensibility and niceness of distinction which prejudice cannot withstand. I soon contracted that passion for Italian music with which it inspires all those who are capable of feeling its excellence.

ROSEMARY  Venice offered Rousseau the very best of baroque opera. But there was another source that entranced him even more: the Ospedali Grandi, which he calls the ‘scuole’. These four great institutions were established in centuries before as hospices for the sick and destitute.

Then, over time, they became orphanages. Boys learned a trade and left on the threshold of adult life to make their own way. Girls were taught music, and the most talented stayed to become instrumentalists and singers.

By the time Rousseau arrived in Venice, the orchestras and choirs of the Ospedali had taken on a life of their own. They were attracting patronage and visitors from across Europe.

Rousseau has left us an account of his visits to one of the Ospedali. Performers were heard, but not seen. They sang and played behind iron grates in the gallery of the church.

MARK (J-J Rousseau)  A kind of music far superior, in my opinion, to that of operas, and which in all Italy has not its equal, nor perhaps in the whole world, is that of the ‘scuole’. The ‘scuole’ are houses of charity, established for the education of young girls without fortune.

Amongst talents cultivated in these young girls, music is in the first rank. Every Sunday at the church of each of the four ‘scuole’, during vespers, motets or anthems with full choruses, accompanied by a great orchestra, and composed and directed by the best masters in Italy, are sung in the galleries by girls only; not one of whom is more than twenty years of age.

I have not an idea of anything so voluptuous and affecting as this music. What vexed me was the iron grate, which suffered nothing to escape but sounds, and concealed from me the angels of which they were worthy. I talked of nothing else.

One day I spoke of it at Le Blond’s; “If you are so desirous,” said he, “to see those little girls, it will be an easy matter to satisfy your wishes. I am one of the administrators of the house, I will give you a collation with them.” I did not let him rest until he had fulfilled his promise.

In entering the saloon, which contained these beauties I so much sighed to see, I felt a trembling of love which I had never before experienced. M. le Blond
presented to me one after the other, these celebrated female singers. Come, Sophia,—she was horrid. Come, Cattina,—she had but one eye. Come, Bettina,—the small-pox had entirely disfigured her. Scarcely one of them was without some striking defect.

Le Blond laughed at my surprise; I was almost in despair. During the collation we endeavoured to excite them, and they soon became enlivened; ugliness does not exclude the graces, and I found they possessed them.

I said to myself, they cannot sing in this manner without intelligence and sensibility, they must have both; in the end, my manner of seeing them changed to such a degree that I left the house almost in love with each of these ugly faces. I had scarcely courage enough to return to vespers.

I still found their singing delightful; and their voices so much embellished their persons that, in spite of my eyes, I obstinately continued to think them beautiful.

ROSEMARY

For much of his professional life, Antonio Vivaldi worked at the Ospedale della Pietà, as a priest, music teacher and composer. Many of his most celebrated works were written for the women there: among them, the Magnificat in G minor.

Straight into ...

Choir – Vivaldi: Magnificat