



SalonEra Podcast Transcript

Episode 3.1: Musicians of the Ospedali

Welcome to the very first episode of the SalonEra podcast. SalonEra is a series from Les Délices that brings together musicians from around the world to share music, stories, and scholarship. This year, every new episode will be simultaneously released as a video and in a condensed form here as a podcast. I'm your host, Debra Nagy and in this episode, *Musicians of the Ospedali*, we'll hear from baritone and scholar Lisandro Abadie, soprano Arwen Myers, and violinist and SalonEra Associate Producer, Shelby Yamin.

You are tuning into SalonEra, a series from Les Délices that brings together musicians from around the world to share music, stories, and scholarship with a global audience of early music lovers. I'm Debra Nagy and this is the first episode of our third season: Musicians of the Ospedali.

Venice is an ancient Italian city built atop over 100 islands connected by roughly 400 bridges. Its iconic sites, (the opulent Rialto Bridge, the gold-studded St. Mark's Basilica, the perfect symmetry of the Doge's Palace) make it one of the top tourist destinations in the world. Though once an important trading post, Venice was no longer a maritime superpower nor a major port by the 1700's; shifting political winds and a series of devastating plagues took their toll. At the same time, Venice acquired a reputation as a city of libertines whose endless parties made the city a not-to-be missed destination for well-heeled Europeans on their "World Tours." Yes, long before Rick Steves toured the Grand Canal and controversial cruise ships docked in its ports, the magical "floating city" was a destination for 17th and 18th century tourists lured by its extravagant spectacles and storied musical entertainments.

Among the tourists who flocked to the Venetian Canals were prominent musical thinkers including the Englishman Charles Burney. Burney's travels across Europe were immortalized in his 1771 book *The Present State of Music in France and Italy*, which offers an indispensable firsthand narrative of some of the most important musical happenings of the time. Burney waxed poetic about the supremely-talented, orphaned girls of Venice's *Ospedale degli Incurabili*. Burney wrote, "I know not which astonished me most, the compass of voice, variety of passages, or rapidity of execution; indeed all were such as would have merited and received great applause in the first opera houses of Europe."

Indeed, the girls of the city's four major *Ospedali* (orphanages) were unlikely but major stars in the rich musical firmament of Venice. Trained by the best composers (including Tartini, Galluppi, and Vivaldi) and provided with instruments designed and built to their exact proportions, the all-female choirs and orchestras of the *Ospedali* were thought to be among the best in the world.

In this episode of SalonEra, bass-baritone and scholar Lisandro Abadie shares the complex histories of these institutions and what we know of the women who trained there; soprano Arwen Meyers and I reflect on our shared experience performing in an all-woman Vivaldi program with Early Music Vancouver back in 2017; and violinist Shelby Yamin reveals the inspiring music and singular life of Maddalena Laura Sirmen, an 18th century alumna of the Ospedale San Lazzaro dei Mendicanti.

DN: Ciao, Lisandro! How are you?

Lisandro Abadie: Very well, hi Debra!

DN: We are listening to music by Vivaldi and our topic is Musicians from the Ospedali in Venice. Today the idea is that you take us on a mini-tour. Venice is known to many as a tourist trap but it has a tremendous amount to offer. Was it always this way?

LA: It was probably always somehow fascinating because it is such a beautiful and unique place in the world. Initially conceived like a theater stage, built on wood that you can barely see, it's built on decorated wood. So it's a very particular, unique place in the world and has always had its unique customs and habits.

DN: In the 18th century, people from many different walks of life were flocking to Italy and to Venice on educational/artistic tours. And I believe we have quite a bit of firsthand information and a sense of perspective on what they experienced there?

LA: A fine way to introduce our girls from the Ospedali, when they perform for very important guests at the end of the 18th century, we have a few paintings of them where they are performing in very secret meetings where a king or prince or a count or another important visitor would come to Venice and those would be the only cases where the girls would leave their Ospedale to go and perform for these appreciated guests. But this is a great way to introduce them in action, being seen and heard by people who came especially to Venice to see this wonder of culture.

If I go from north to south, so to say, the northernmost Ospedale is the Ospedale dei Mendicanti which is probably the oldest of all, founded in the 13th century. Next to it is the Ospedaletto, right south of Mendicanti. And the third one, to the south, is the very famous Ospedale della Pietà, where Vivaldi taught and worked for almost forty years. And in the center-south, we see the Ospedale degli Incurabili. These are the four institutions we will talk about today.

At the end of the 17th century, a Russian visitor sent by Peter the Great, his name is Pyotr Andreyevich Tolstoy, and he is the great-grandfather of the famous writer. Count Tolstoy tells us in 1698,

"In Venice there are convents where the women play the organ and other instruments and sing so wonderfully that nowhere else in the world could one find such sweet and harmonious song. Therefore people come to Venice from all parts of the world to refresh themselves with these angelic songs, above all those of the convent of the Incurabili."

So he seems to have had a special interest in the music played at the Incurabili. He is really charmed. Every Ospedale had its own speciality of patients or children who could be accepted there. The Ospedale dei Mendicanti started with patients of leprosy and then went on to keep busy with very poor children; children who didn't have the means to survive within their own families or their families could not pay for their education. And so, children could learn different things and girls especially could learn music. This is something we see in the Ospedale: boys could learn other tasks, girls have a very high quality musical training. There is one portrait of Adriana Ferrarese who is probably a student here at the Ospedaletto or at the Mendicanti, (sources don't agree), but the thing is that she left; she escaped from her Ospedale to marry a certain "del Bene," so she became Adriana Ferrarese del Bene and then became Mozart's first Fiodiligi in his *Così fan tutte*. She is one of the greatest renowned daughters of the Ospedale to have acquired international fame by leaving and traveling abroad.

One thing that's important and we should know is that not everybody who studied music at the Ospedale was born and raised at the Ospedale. Some of the girls were there because they had extraordinary musical talent even though they had a family home where they could have stayed. Those girls were there to be educated in music. If they were very talented, they would be educated for free, at no expense to their families. But some other girls, if their families could afford to pay for their education were called *figlie di spese*, so those girls would be sent to the Ospedale just to be trained by those great teachers, but their families would pay for that.

And then we cross to south of Castello, to the Ospedale della Pietà, which is where Vivaldi taught and where he made very, very famous students with his violin and his personal dedication to their education. This is where he performed and his students performed.

DN: What do we know about daily life experience for the girls in the Ospedali?

LA: We have this very valuable document, the *Dispensa Cibaria* from 1712. It's a timetable of what food was given to every kind of girl in the Ospedale della Pietà. There is a tradition that says that the girls of the choir, (that means the girls who sang in the choir and played in the orchestra - it was all called the *coro*), were better-fed. The girls of the *coro* became so famous that the Ospedali decided to invest not only in their food but in building a church that would be a fantastic concert hall, built in such a way that it had rounded corners so the sound would circulate very well. Often the concerts would be so well-attended that they would have to open the doors of the church and not only were people standing on the sidewalks but some people were standing on gondolas, on the water, listening to the music happening inside. So there were major investments made for the girls of the Ospedali. And we know that Antonio Vivaldi invested, well not his own pocket money, but he invested his time and energy to go around the north of Italy to look for valuable instruments for these girls who would then play them. And we know that the better they played, the better instruments they got.

DN: Before we leave this, I wonder if I could ask why boys and girls were treated differently in terms of either their tasks as foundlings or culturally in general?

LA: Yes this is a question I think about all the time and through everything I read, I try to find one simple answer but it is possibly true to say girls could not obtain musical education almost

anywhere else, so it was a very unique thing that the Ospedali could offer and the fact that the girls could dedicate so much time to learning an instrument made—slowly with time—the Ospedali a place that could offer this unique opportunity. So the girls received this set of skills and then the Ospedali invested in them as objects of display. It was also a way to protect them; from a mundane life, from jobs that wouldn't be as interesting, and to train them at the highest possible intellectual level at a time when girls weren't supposed to learn Latin, go to university, or study and write history. But these were parts of culture that could be trained for girls.

[Music selection: Audio from Early Music Vancouver: "Cum sancto spiritu" from Vivaldi's Gloria]

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DN: We've been enjoying music from this 2017 performance produced as a collaborative project and performed all throughout the Pacific Northwest. It was produced by Early Music Vancouver with participation from Portland Baroque Orchestra, Seattle Early Music, and it was just tremendous. There was also participation from the Pacific Girls Choir. It was this incredible, multi-generational project that we have been enjoying.

I'm very pleased to welcome you, Arwen, who played a big role in that project and to have the opportunity to relive that experience and share your thoughts about it. Five years have passed since we were privileged to participate in and create that project and I'm wondering if you've done anything like it since or could anticipate anything like it again?

Arwen Myers: I was lucky enough to be part of the Hildegard von Bingen Ordo Virtutum recording and tour that Seraphic Fire did just before the pandemic and that album came out just last year. Similarly to this, it was special to get to make music with an incredible group of women. And I also sing with Lorelei Ensemble, which is a new music ensemble based in Boston. You know, there's just something special about performing with women. There's a different energy that women bring to the classical world. We have a different lived experience and I think the opportunity to get to perform with only other women is a very different feeling.

DN: I was so struck in the rehearsal process in particular by the lack of top-down hierarchy and the amount of sharing and the number of different voices that were heard throughout that process. You know, something that our listeners may not realize is that yes, we are watching a performance entirely inhabited by women but also, there is no conductor. It was a fantastic chamber music experience. With a fearless leader at the front, Monica Huggett, gets up and starts asking for more at the very end of that.

AM: It's really special to work with someone who asks for your best, then your better, then your best again. The passion she brings to her musicianship and that she gets out of her players is really special. Especially with a group like that, that's already bringing so much to the table, to have someone say, "No no, we can bring more of ourselves to this," it was just magic. It takes classical music off the shelf that we sometimes put it on and brings it into reality.

DN: Do you suppose that some of that energy that we felt in this all-woman environment could be similar to what it was like for women in the Ospedali in Venice?

AM: I would think so. At that time, there was nothing like it happening. And I know a lot of them were students and there's nothing like the energy that young people can bring to music-making. I can't imagine anything other than unbridled joy in performing this piece. It's such a joyful piece and that sort of pure joy is lived out in a special way by young musicians and by women in the same way that we're talking about: it wasn't something that happened very often and I imagine they knew how special it was.

[Music selection: Audio from Early Music Vancouver: "Domine Deus" from Vivaldi's Gloria]

Trailer for Winds of Change podcast: Les Délices is back in-person this season, but we haven't left our digital audience behind. We're releasing excerpts from every Concert Series program this year in podcast episodes augmented by historical context and artist insights. First up: *Winds of Change*, an all-instrumental program inspired by the turbulent Age of Revolutions. Featuring *A Journey to Freedom* by living Haitian composer Sydney Guillaume along with works for flute, oboe, and strings by 18th century French-Caribbean composer Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de St. Georges and Luigi Boccherini. Wherever you are, you can experience the special magic of Les Délices. Thanks for listening to this episode of SalonEra! Subscribe to this podcast to hear more from SalonEra and to be notified when our first special episode on *Winds of Change* drops October 17th.

Trailer for SalonEra: Harmonie: Playing Classical-era woodwinds like clarinet, oboe, and horn is akin to a high-wire act. Gorgeous and awe-inspiring when everything goes right but - with few keys, no valves, and jaw-dropping virtuosity - it can also be downright treacherous! Thankfully, we're in great hands as guest clarinetist Marie Ross, flutist Stephen Schultz, horn player Todd Williams, and bassoonist Marc Vallon join host Debra Nagy for "Harmonie," in which they demystify their instruments and celebrate chamber music for winds by Reicha, Mozart, Krommer, and others.

DN: Welcome, Shelby

Shelby Yamin: Hi! One of my main projects these past few years has been the music of Maddalena Lombardini and so only through her and her music have I begun exploring the scene of the Ospedale so it's such a pleasure to be here to talk about it, so thank you!

DN: It's so interesting, we've mentioned Sirmen, who we'll talk more about in a moment, and Lisandro has talked about about Adriana Ferrarese and Faustina Bordoni and it's fascinating to think not just about these individuals who are some of the most famous of the entire 18th century but also to get a chance to think about all these individuals who are named in different documents [from the time.]

LA: There is a big difference immediately with the two singers we've mentioned (Ferrarese and Bordoni) which is that Faustina Bordoni had a family name - Bordoni. Adriana Ferrarese was called that because she probably came from Ferrara, but she did not have a family name. These girls that we are going to see in the sources I've chosen today normally don't have a family name.

So there we get to one of the most famous performers of the 18th century: Anna Maria is an incredible violin player, she studied with Vivaldi. And I would particularly like to show an incredible source we have, the Anna Maria partbook. It's an entire collection of first violin partbooks with 31 concerti, 25 of which I think are by Vivaldi. All these objects preserve the names of these girls and give them international fame, so to speak. So that they can come to us. I insist, these were girls that were abandoned by their families and they became stars all over Europe with their performances and their compositions; with their music. This is something that only the Ospedale of Venice achieved to such a degree.

DN: What were the ultimate destinies for any given woman in the Ospedale, whether she stayed or managed to leave?

SY: For the vast majority of the women, they were not even allowed to perform outside, so they would end up teaching other students and they were confined to that lifestyle. Maddalena [Lombardini Sirmen] is also an example of someone who didn't do that. But for the most part, they were either married but not performing, like they would leave but not pursue a career, or stay within the system and teach or become a nun, so they could pursue a religious "career."

LA: It's a way to create a monopoly within the city because every Ospedale had its special sound, its special performers. They weren't interchangeable: you could hear Anna Maria at the Pietà, you could only hear someone from the Incurabili if you went to the Incurabili. So it's a way to protect their market and they invested a lot! We know that Vivaldi purchased the most expensive violin he could for Anna Maria and for other girls he bought less expensive instruments, (we still have the prices, we still have the bills) so it means that they were really trying to invest. And of course with composers, the Ospedale were also investing in wonderful composers and teachers. When [Charles] Burney gets there and hears Galuppi, he says, "Well there's not much more that can be done in terms of quality of music in Europe, this guy is simply the best," it's just before Mozart and he really is a spectacular composer and those girls are singing and performing the best available music in that part of the world.

DN: The last part of music that we'll enjoy is from a recently-released CD featuring Shelby and **Sarah Bleile Douglass** playing music by Maddalena Lombardini Sirmen and Shelby, I wonder if you could introduce what we're going to hear and also give us a few biographical highlights of Sirmen, having been educated at and left the Ospedale?

SY: So the recording is of Lombardini's Op. 5 violin duets and Maddalena was trained at the Mendicanti. She was an auditioned member; she wasn't an orphan, she wasn't picked up from the streets. She had to beat out some other little kids at her audition and she got in. She had this great, very thorough education in music and distinguished herself in violin. She ended up getting special permission to travel to study with Tartini. She got married to another violinist. Through him, she was able to perform at venues that some of these other women who we've mentioned wouldn't have been able to. So I hope you enjoy this little snippet from the recording that I did with Sarah! And thank you!

DN: It's been a great pleasure to talk to both of you, thank you so much Shelby and a huge thanks to you, Lisandro, for all the amazing resources you've shared with us and our audience today. Thank you for joining us on SalonEra!

LA: Thank you so much

[Music selection: Audio from CD Maddalena Lombardini Violin Duets, Op. 5 No. 2 in D Major, II. Allegretto]

Thanks so much for listening to this episode of SalonEra! Support for SalonEra is provided by Cuyahoga Arts and Culture, the Ohio Arts Council, and audience members like you. Special thanks to Episode Sponsor Deborah Malamud and artist sponsors Paula Mindes & George Gilliam for Lisandro Abadie. This episode was created by Executive Producer Debra Nagy, Associate Producer Shelby Yamin, and Hannah De Priest, our script writer and special projects manager.

This episode featured selections from a 2017 live performance of Vivaldi's Gloria and a concerti for oboe, violin, and trumpet generously shared with us by Early Music Vancouver, plus the second movement of Maddalena Laura Sirmen's Violin Duet in D Major, recorded by Shelby Yamin and Sarah Bleile Douglass, released on the Orpheus Classical Label. A one-hour filmed version of this episode **is available on salonera.org, where you can also** learn more about the music and information shared in this and any episode.

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