

Review *Music*

From a shrunken giant

Tempesta tackles the work of the prolific, but forgotten, father Scarlatti.

By David Patrick Stearns
INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC

Early-music groups are in the business of attracting audiences to music they didn't know they were missing. So the question at last weekend's Tempesta di Mare concerts was what sort of keys can unlock the demure, even obscure artistic sensibility of Alessandro Scarlatti, a giant in 18th-century Rome but one whose output is like a vast lost continent, and not without reason.

Unlike Handel (who made the conventional seem new) or Domenico Scarlatti (Alessandro's son, whose scintillating piano sonatas drew inspiration from Spanish street music), the composer heard at Sunday's Presbyterian Church at Chestnut Hill concert wasn't out to distinguish himself in typical ways, but served a more disposable, servitude-tinged function.

The fact that Scarlatti wrote 700-plus cantatas suggests they weren't meant for repeated hearings and thus don't ask to enter one's memory. Therefore performers must mine the music for all it can deliver in the moment. Instead of framing a performer's talent, Scarlatti modestly provided the foundation.

Tempesta ultimately succeeded, both on Sunday and on its new Chandos-label disc,

Alessandro Scarlatti: Cantatas and Chamber Music. An essential ingredient is soprano Clara Rottsohl, a relative newcomer to the Philadelphia music community and one with exactly the kind of vocal charisma this music needs. Since I first heard her in 2009, the voice has been scaled back to afford more flexibility, and now combines the best aspects of the pinpoint, low-vibrato accuracy of Julianne Baird and the dark-timbred, more generalized approach of Montserrat Figueras.

Though some baroque specialists use the music like heightened speech, Rottsohl integrated text into a longer phrase that, thanks to her considerable coloristic resources, went beyond surface articulation and into the text's meaning. The exterior was suave and composed. The interior had dynamicism — partly because co-artistic director Richard Stone's contributions on archlute seemed to consciously create dramatic signposts in music that can too easily fall into sameness.

Some of the concert's repertoire was chosen to spotlight Tempesta's co-artistic director, flutist Gwyn Roberts, who was in unusually good form Sunday, particularly in Handel's *Trio Sonata in G minor (Op. 2 No. 5)*, the program's most substantial music. Han-

del was also represented by his *Alpestre montre*, a cantata that showed the young composer using the medium not as an end in itself, but as a workshop for launching more imposing operas. Big difference. Also interesting was a text describing Alpine country full of danger and loneliness. The more familiar romanticization of all that was a century or so in the future.

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