

Karina Gauvin with Les Boréades de Montréal

April 27, 2017 Convocation Hall, University of Alberta

by Morgan Luethe

The remarkable voice of Canadian soprano Karina Gauvin, supported by the superb playing of Les Boréades de Montréal, captivated the audience at Convocation Hall on April 27th, 2017 in an expertly-crafted period performance of selections from the stage works of the mid-Baroque composer Henry Purcell.

Period performances, meaning those given on replicated period instruments played in the style of the day, are designed to give audiences an opportunity to hear how this music would have sounded in its own day. Though this type of performance style has its detractors, namely those who see it as sacrificing emotional warmth and depth of tone for the sake of stiff historical accuracy, it lends an undeniably rustic vitality to the music, itself. Gauvin and the specialists of Les Boréades de Montréal gave a concert that brimmed with this visceral, natural quality and brought a palpable energy to the music of England's greatest composer.

The program got underway with music from Purcell's 1691 semi-opera *King Arthur*. In the first two selections, *Hither, This Way* and *How Blest Are the Shepherds*, Gauvin impressively demonstrated the charm of her voice, singing with strong diction and impressive vocal control to highlight the composer's acute sensitivity to the text to which his music was set. In these pieces, the genius of Purcell revealed itself in the subtle tone painting expertly employed to bring vitality and heightened emotional accuracy to the words of the libretto.

Interspersed throughout the vocal numbers which comprised much of the program were purely instrumental selections that provided Les Boréades de Montréal with ample opportunity to show off the beautiful rustic sound of their instruments, all of which were replicas of the 17th century originals of Purcell's day. The group's robust playing lighted on the unique energy and freshness of this composer's music, and gave the audience rewarding insight into the sounds and playing styles of that period. The criticism that period performances are a dry academic exercise with appeal only for Early-Music Purists pales in the face of Les Boréades de Montréal renditions of the dignified Chaconnes, and buoyant Hornpipes that populate Purcell's stage works; in the hands of these musicians, Purcell's operatic music is revealed to be just as vigorous and dramatic as any found in a *Don Giovanni* or *Eugene Onegin*.

Though he wrote music in all the popular genres of his day, Henry Purcell's fame today rests heavily on his semi-operas. His death at the age of 36 suggests a famous quote uttered about the similarly early and tragic death of Franz Schubert, namely that music had "buried a treasure but even greater hopes." The same can be said to hold for Purcell; had he lived, there is no doubt that he would have continued to develop his approach to writing music for the operatic stage, already, at the time of his death, a sophisticated blend of French and Italian inspirations ingeniously blended with the musical conventions and attitudes of 17th century England.

On both sides of the program, Karina Gauvin demonstrated a vocal prowess that betrayed years of intense study and dedication to the music of this period. She and musicians of Les Boréades de Montréal unleashed a gripping program of music that is still too often overlooked, despite the considerable stature of its composer. All told, the evening featured music from each of *King Arthur*, *Oedipus*, *The Fairy Queen*, *Don Quixote*, as well as a selection from the early *Harmonia Sacra*. The night ended with the group's heartrending account of the unequalled Lament from *Dido and Aeneas*. After some justifiably rapturous applause, the musicians graciously supplied the audience with encores from Händel's operas *Alcina*, and *Rinaldo*, respectively.

Late 17th century opera is not considered the sort of fare that attracts the average concert goer – even among devotees of ancient music, the genre is approached with some trepidation. Oftentimes, apart from the routine complaints leveled against the conventions of period performance, Baroque operas are seen by audiences as being emotionally dead and dramatically impotent – essentially, boring. After exposure to some of the treasures of this genre at the hands of Gauvin and the expert players of Les Boréades de Montréal, however, it's clear that such hesitancy is unfounded. If there is any real drama to be praised in the great operas of subsequent centuries, it is due in part to the innovation and genius evident in the foundational examples of the Baroque era.