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Boris at Boston

Near the beginning of the 2005 Boston Early Music Festival and Exhibition programme book James S. Nicolson traces the genesis of the festival. This biennial gathering of musicians, instrument builders, vendors and music lovers began ‘one evening in 1979’, as Friedrich and Ingeborg von Heune, themselves musicians and instrument makers, brought together a group of about 20 people ‘to hear their vision of a European style instrument exhibition with attendant concerts to be established . . . in Boston’. With the first festival taking place in May 1981, the entire world of early music has come to know the Boston Early Music Festival and Exhibition as the premier platform for performers and instrument builders across the globe.

Fans of the festival have become spoiled, expecting—and getting—a lavish operatic production as the centrepiece of the week-long celebration of early music. Since 1997 the festival’s artistic directors, Paul O’Dette and Stephen Stubbs, have set out, beginning with Luigi Rossi’s 1647 *Orfeo*, to bring the audience through the history of Baroque opera, one decade at a time. This year (13–19 June) we were treated to the fifth opera in the series, a work composed in 1710. The clincher was that this opera, Johann Mattheson’s *Boris Goudenow*, had never previously been performed. Indeed, those attending the gala opening (14 June) were treated to a world première (but see forthcoming correspondence—Ed.).

Stephen Stubbs has previously explained in *Early music* (xxxiii/2 (May 2005), pp.283–92) how *Boris* was among a group of Mattheson scores returned to Hamburg in 1998, having previously been presumed lost during the Second World War. George Buelow brought the opera to the attention of the festival directors, and the rest is history: Jürgen Neubacher of the Hamburg Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek provided microfiche and access to the manuscript, and, because the score was only Mattheson’s first draft, the opera was reconstructed for the festival performances. Jörg Jacobi then put together the performing edition of the opera, now published by Edition Baroque of Bremen.

Boris presented a number of challenges for its producers. Most importantly, how does one recreate an opera that has never been performed? Furthermore, this particular opera has over 70 numbers, a macaronic libretto with three confusingly interwoven romantic couples, limited opportunity for dance and, one might say, a ‘B-list’ composer.

Nevertheless, if there were any doubts about this opera, they were put to rest by a beautifully rendered production. *Boris* held the audience from beginning to end. David Cockayne’s sets and Anna Watkins’s costumes provided a strikingly exotic Russian setting. Boris’s elaborate coronation outfit reminded one of how visually splendid opera can be (see illus.1), and the audience enthusiastically applauded the unveiling of the Moscow skyline at the start of the third act. The stage direction by Lucy Graham and Nils Niemann was engaging and, like the costumes and sets, helped to carry the drama where the libretto or music might not have. While *Boris* does not call for much in the way of choreography, the dances were all in the French style, with a large ‘Chaconne for Cupids and Pleasures’ at the opera’s end. Lucy Graham’s choreography and the ensemble of dancers were at the level of excellence that festival audiences have come to expect.

Mattheson’s cosmopolitan score, drawing on German, Italian and French traditions, uses both German and Italian texts. Even with so much musical variety, several numbers stand out, notably the duos woven throughout and Tsar Theodorus’s *Schwangesang*, written with obbligato violin (sung emotively by Olivier Laquerre and accompanied superbly by Robert Mealy). The cast of ten principals and chorus was highlighted by Boston favourite Ellen Hargis (soprano) as Boris’s sister, Irina; a brilliantly comic William Hite (tenor) as Bogda, Boris’s flatulent servant; and Russian bass, Vadim Kravets, in the title role. With its delightful singing, the Boston-based PALS Children’s Chorus, under the direction of Johanna Hill Simpson, elevated the production from performance to spectacle.

The star of the opera—and, perhaps, the entire festival—was the Boston Early Music Festival Orchestra. In addition to playing the four opera presentations, this hand-picked ensemble performed two separate evening concerts. One, titled ‘Nights at the opera’ (15 June) and featuring music from past BEMF operatic productions,



1 The coronation scene from the Boston Early Music Festival's production of Mattheson's *Boris Goudenow* (Photo: Andre Costantini)

was dominated by soprano Karina Gauvin's stunning presence in scenes from the 2003 production of Conradi's *Ariadne*. The other, 'Five concerti and a Magnificat' (17 June), became, due to illness of an expected soloist, a platform for some orchestra members to show their wares, performing concertos not originally scheduled. On the same programme Matthias Maute's masterful playing of Telemann and Vivaldi kept the audience on the edge of its seats, and Kristian Bezuidenhout's rendition of a concerto by Johann Wilhelm Hertel proved the fortepiano capable of elegantly projected pianissimos and Hertel a composer deserving greater renown. As with the opera, the orchestra appeared to receive little direction from the artistic directors who, in the programme booklet, rightfully noted that most music direction takes place during preparation. In performance, however, leadership was often left to violinist Robert Mealy, who appeared to levitate from his chair when giving cues. The orchestra's upper strings were noticeably

more precise than in past years, at times outclassing the usually distinguished continuo.

Unfortunately, by grimacing or moving about, some members of the Festival Orchestra expended too much energy *showing* what they wanted the audience to hear, and one was left to wonder how much better the ensemble could have been had this wasted energy been put into the music. This distracting sentimentality was in stark contrast to the highly refined playing of the viola da gamba duo Jérôme Hantäi and Kaori Uemura. In a programme of bass viol duets from England and North Germany (15 June), the artists' intimate coalescence was matched by a discrete and profound musicality. While thoroughly comfortable in the violists' traditional English repertory, Hantäi's and Uemura's approach to a *galante duetto* by Christoph Schaffrath confirmed their excellence.

Boris was staged at the Cutler Majestic Theatre at Emerson College, a landmark hall designed specifically

for opera. (It was later performed at the Tanglewood Summer Music Festival in western Massachusetts. Further performances are planned for Russia in 2006.) Jordan Hall at New England Conservatory, the site of the festival concerts, was also designed for opera, but it proved a fitting venue for most of the concerts.

The Boston Camerata, celebrating its 50th year, took full advantage of Jordan Hall, even parading through the aisles several times during its programme of the *Carmina Burana* (18 June). Led by the ever-charismatic Joel Cohen, this ensemble of consummate performers drew the audience to a standing ovation, and the thrilling concert was concluded with birthday festivities, celebrating Camerata performers past and present. Even the City of Boston contributed to the event, declaring 18 June 2005 to be 'Boston Camerata Day'. The outgoing character of the venerable ensemble was matched only by a different camerata from across the Atlantic: Camerata Trajectina's performance of 17th-century Dutch sea shanties (13 June) was so colourful and varied that it was easy to forget that one was mostly hearing simple strophic songs.

With so much going on at the festival, it was impossible to take everything in. As in the past, opera performances were scheduled alongside some evening programmes, and concerts at 11 pm sometimes included performers who had already appeared earlier in the evening at another concert or the opera. All this, along with many concurrent and 'fringe' events, made for a cornucopia of music. Perhaps there was too much music. A crossover tribute to the Russian gypsy *prima donna* Stepanida Soldatova by the ensemble Talisman (17 June) stretched the definition of 'early music', and a reading of selections from the Scandinavian Dübén collection by Ensemble Européen William Byrd (18 June) was wanting.

The future of early music lies as much with publishers and instrument builders as it does with performers. Fortunately, the von Heunes' vision was built around an exhibition. This, set somewhat awkwardly between three disjunctive floors of the Radisson Hotel Boston, was international in scope, featuring many vendors of scores and books on music and a wide array of instruments. More music was to be heard here as firms, such as the Harpsichord Clearing House, hosted free concerts by reputed performers in their own exhibition rooms. Though the exhibition failed to show a young generation of instrument builders, bow-maker Pieter Affourtit and keyboard instrument maker Kevin Spindler, for instance, proved that fine work is not exclusive to the oldest and best-known craftspeople.

With 12 biennial festivals behind it, the 2005 Boston Early Music Festival and Exhibition was second to none. The BEMF organization, enthusiastically led by Executive Director Kathleen Fay, is largely responsible for maintaining Boston's reputation as the centre for early music in the United States. The BEMF's annual concert series continues to feed Boston's demand for excellent historical performance, and the 2005–6 season, featuring such luminaries as Bach Collegium Japan and Hespèrion XXI, will no doubt satiate the most worldly tastes. This empire of early music will continue to keep us entertained and enlightened for a good many years to come.

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Giovanni Tasso

Baroque music in Faenza

During May 2005 the town of Faenza hosted the first production of *Creator*, an ambitious festival of sacred music promoted and organized by the town and diocese of Faenza, together with Accademia Bizantina, the well-known period-instrument ensemble from Ravenna. Romano Valentini, President and Music Director of the festival, said: 'In the choice of a sacred repertory this initiative proposes an interesting reading of the whole European musical tradition'. The festival aims to rediscover neglected works and recontextualize masterpieces which, over the past 100 years, have often been performed out of their original context.

This latter aspect was the theme of the first concert of the festival, held on Sunday 8 May. The occasion was the Episcopal Mass celebrated by the Bishop of Faenza in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary, patron saint of the town. Stagione Armonica, conducted by Sergio Balestracci, performed the five-part mass by Giacomo Carissimi, on the 400th anniversary of his birth in 1605. The attendance on this occasion was remarkable, the audience filling every corner of the splendid Faenza Cathedral, testifying to the validity of the initiative.

The second concert involved Accademia Bizantina, conducted by Ottavio Dantone, in a very popular concert centred on Vivaldi's Gloria in D, RV589, and two instrumental works by Corelli, who was born in the neighbouring town of Fusignano, and who is the composer most performed by Accademia Bizantina. As always Dantone's skill as a conductor exalted the emotional contrasts that pervade the pages of Vivaldi's works, and in Monica Pic-