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Profile: Elisabeth Belgrano and the Language of Passion

A Swedish-born soprano in New Mexico
explores the music of Anne Chabanceau de La Barre

"During the last eight years, Anne Chabanceau de La Barre has become an obsession - my alter ego. I have spent hours following her life and career, trying to find the music she sang and striving to understand her thoughts and her passions," says Elisabeth Belgrano, a Swedish-born soprano now based in New Mexico.

"I found the name of this singer in a Stockholm library in 1996 while reading about 17th-century Swedish music. She became my best friend, and I wanted to know as much as I could about what she sang and how she lived; I wanted to get to her roots."

De La Barre (1628-1688) was a French singer who performed in Paris (during the birth of French opera) and later moved to Sweden, where she sang at the court of Queen Christina. A woman at the center of a number of striking movements in the development of vocal music, she was a singer in the French salons where composers such as Michel Lambert broke ground with new, expressive music for solo voice, music which became a key aspect of the milieu of 17th-century Paris. She was also the only French singer in the French premiere of Francesco Cavalli's *L'Ercole amante*.

"There is much interest in women in music right now, but I'm not only interested in the music," says Belgrano. In the late 1990s, she "started to look into the women of the salons - a place where, perhaps, many of the airs that de La Barre sang were composed. At

the time, I had started my studies in a masters program at Göteborg University. The program was more like a grant, so I was able to choose my teachers and had the freedom to do what I wanted. I could go to Paris for two months and spend time in libraries, but also absorb and feel what de La Barre would have felt, almost know what she would have eaten.

"I love the research aspect of my work," she says. "It gives you a different

perspective when you are able to go to the library and look at the music that was once in Richelieu's library - to be able to see that and think, 'Wow, I wonder who held this music through the years?'"

Belgrano literally walked in de La Barre's footsteps. "When I was in Paris,

because I had a grant I was able to stay in a fabulous 17th-century mansion, and there was a museum where they kept all the maps. I made photocopies of the 17th-century maps to see where she lived and where she walked. Of course, it's completely different now, but I spent hours walking in Paris, trying to imagine."

De La Barre holds interest for musical reasons, too, Belgrano says. "She seemed to be one of the singers who could handle both the Italian and French. She sang the airs of Lambert with their new style - so full of expression and colors and passions. I don't think I can speak about the passions enough. This is the time when Descartes was writing about the passions [*Les Passions de l'âme*, 1649] and





PHOTO: ESHA CHIOCCIO

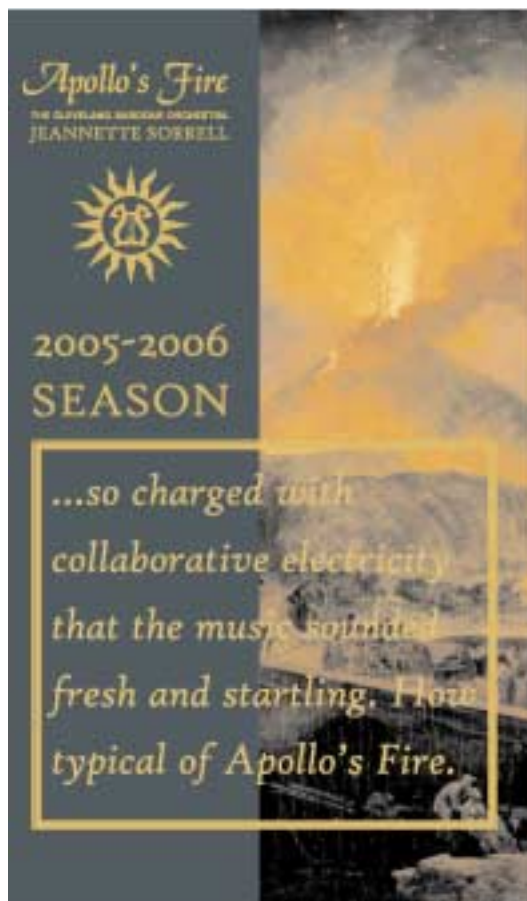
**"I don't think
I can speak
about the
passions
enough."
— Elisabeth
Belgrano.**

Charles Le Brun did the drawings entitled *The Expression of the Passions*. It all comes together."

Rhetoric, passion, and music also came together in a lecture-recital Belgrano presented with musicologist Catherine E. Gordon-Seifert to the Society for Seventeenth-Century Music. "It's good to find somebody to share ideas with when you are feeling lonely in your work. She is a great mentor," Belgrano says of Gordon-Seifert. The team is at work on something new, a project based on Bénigne de Bacilly's 1668 treatise *Remarques curieuses sur l'art de bien chanter* (A Commentary upon the Art of Proper Singing), which is a bible for French singing. "Bacilly was very detailed in his instructions, and we are going to make one or two recordings - there are lots of pieces - based on this," Belgrano explains.

But de La Barre and her Swedish patron Queen Christina remain Belgrano's passion. "I would like to have a film made about de La Barre's world," says Belgrano. "I'm also surprised nobody has made a film about Queen Christina. I like the idea of focusing on the period and the music, but things would be seen through the eyes of the singer: we would see Christina and the court and everything that happens around this woman. It's such an interesting time with its history, music, and science. It could be a film told in the language of the passions."

—Craig Zeichner 🍷



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