



Sunday 11 July, 7pm
Royal Spa, Queen's Park

OPERA @ THE SPA Gala Fundraiser

BREMF Early Opera young artists

Highlights from Francesca Caccini's colourful and witty opera *La liberazione di Ruggiero*

Deborah Roberts and **Oliver Webber** *musical directors*

Thomas Guthrie *director*

Claire Williams *continuo lead*

Angela Hicks *soprano* Alcina

Kieran White *tenor* Ruggiero

Anna Bachleitner *soprano* Melissa / Nunzia

Elsbeth Piggott *soprano* Sirena / 1st Water Deity

Kat Carson *soprano* 1st Damigella

Kristiina Watt *soprano* 2nd Damigella

Luthien Brackett *mezzo-soprano* 3rd Damigella / Female Monster

Marcella Di Garbo *soprano* 2nd Water Deity / Female Plant / Formerly Enchanted Lady

Peter Martin *tenor* Fiume Vistola / Pastore / Astolfo

Toshi Ogita *tenor* Male Plant / 3rd Water Deity

Stuart O'Hara *bass-baritone* Male Monster

Oliver Webber *violin 1*

Marguerite Wassermann *violin 2*

Olwen Foulkes *violin 3, recorder*

Iain Hall *cello, tenor viol, recorder*

Harry Buckoke *bass viol, lirone*

Jacob Garside *bass viol*

Isaline Leloup *violone*

Aileen Henry *harp*

Kristiina Watt *chitarrone*

Eric Thomas *chitarrone*

Claire Williams *harpsichord, chamber organ*

The music

On the morning of 3rd February 1625, during the season of Carnival, a special performance took place in a loggia within the Villa Poggio Imperiale, the recently acquired palace of the Archduchess of Florence, Maria Maddalena of Austria. It was called *La liberazione di Ruggiero dall'isola di Alcina*, and the occasion was in honour of a visit by her nephew, Wladyslaw, the crown prince of Poland, freshly arrived after a great victory against the Turks. The commedia was followed by two dances, involving members of the court, and also an elaborate 'horse ballet' that took place in the courtyard outside, after which all returned to the loggia for a final madrigal in praise of Tuscan women and the path of virtue. The music for this was composed by Francesca Caccini, court composer and the highest paid musician at the Medici court.

Francesca was born in 1587, daughter to composer and singer Giulio Caccini, himself at the very centre of Florentine musical life. She received a very thorough musical education and was taking part in court spectacles and proto operas from the age of 13. In particular she was part of an ensemble of female voices, modelled on the Ferrarese *concerto di donne*, that also included her sister, her mother and the famous soprano Vittoria Archilei. In 1604, along with other members of her family (the *concerto Caccini*) she travelled to Paris to entertain the king, and was described by him as singing better than anyone in France. Attempts to procure her services for the French court failed, and she returned to Florence where she soon began to win a reputation not only as a singer and multi-instrumentalist, but also as a composer.

While it is clear that Francesca's position at the Florentine court was entirely owing to her own merits, it must have been easier for a woman to rise to prominence there than in any other Italian court. It was a women's court, ruled by two female regents, Maria Maddalena, the Archduchess, and her mother-in-law, Cristina of Lorraine. Not surprisingly, the subjects of a number of court entertainments at this time centred around women; strong and heroic women in particular. The walls of the Villa Imperiale had also recently been repainted with scenes from the lives of great heroines. A prominent courtier, Cristoforo Bronzini was writing a 25-volume manuscript entitled *Della dignità e nobiltà delle donne*, a work justifying female rule through countless stories of great and heroic women from antiquity onwards.

This, then, is the background to Francesca's work, and very probably also to the storyline of Ruggiero. It is, sadly, the only one of her 16 stage works to survive, but the reason for its publication, and subsequent survival, must indicate its importance to her patronesses as reinforcing Bronzini's and others' work in promoting proto-feminist ideas.

Tonight we present a concert performance of excerpts from the opera, the culmination of an intensive week of exploration, rehearsal and filming with an international cast of young singers and instrumentalists. The finished film will be shown in our Autumn season – keep an eye on updates at bremf.org.uk to find out more and to donate to help us Free Ruggiero!

Deborah Roberts

The creatives

Deborah Roberts was born in Europe and graduated from Nottingham University with an MA in editing and interpreting renaissance and baroque music. She has remained fascinated by the discovery of new repertoire and performance styles ever since. As a long-term former member of The Tallis Scholars, Deborah performed with them in over 1,200 concerts in many weird and wonderful places around the world and in countless recordings of rare and beautiful renaissance music. She also sang with many other early music ensembles as a soloist and consort singer.

She took up choral direction 20 years ago, and enjoys running courses in sacred polyphony and early opera. In 2002 she co-founded Brighton Early Music Festival with Clare Norburn and remains its artistic director.

Oliver Webber's rather obscure musical interests range from the construction of historical gut strings to the metrical analysis of old Italian poetry, with stops along the way to include ornamentation, historical bow- and violin-holds, and rhetoric. With his ensemble, Monteverdi String Band, he has explored many of these interests through intriguing programmes involving ornamented madrigals, swordsmanship and (memorably!) the reconstruction of Galileo's experiments on acceleration to the accompaniment of a pair of lutes.

He has been a regular visitor to BREMF over the years, immersing himself in opera productions of Monteverdi, Blow, Gagliano and – back in 2015 – Francesca Caccini's *La liberazione di Ruggiero*. The collaborative way of working that has evolved with the BREMF team, in which playing, singing and acting are all understood to be working towards the same goal of touching the hearts and minds of the audience, has been a source of great inspiration, and it is a particular pleasure to revisit *Ruggiero* with everything we've learned from each other, and from the music and literature, over the last few years.

monteverdistringband.com

Thomas Guthrie is an innovative and award-winning British director and musician working in theatre and music to tell stories in vivid, new and direct ways.

A former Jette Parker Young Artist Stage Director at the Royal Opera House in London, his revival of David McVicar's *Die Zauberflöte* there won What's On Stage Best Revival 2018. His own critically acclaimed productions of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Die Zauberflöte* at Longborough Festival Opera led to an invitation to direct Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer* there in 2018 (subsequently called 'one of the best productions at this venue I have seen', Rupert Christiansen, *Telegraph*). He directed Verdi's *Aida* at the Liceu in 2020, and his production of Marco da Gagliano's rare 1608 opera *La Dafne* – created in a week with young singers at Brighton Early Music Festival – was nominated for a 2020 RPS Award.

Thomas also works with non-professionals of all ages and backgrounds. Some of his most thrilling projects have been in this field, including work with Streetwise Opera, the Prison Choir Project, the National Youth Choir of Great Britain, and the Royal Opera House, through whom he has inspired hundreds to connect with their inner Caruso and raise the roof.

Thomas is the founder and artistic director of the charity Music and Theatre for All, former Guest Artistic Advisor to the York Early Music Festival, was Belknap Fellow at Princeton University, New Jersey in 2017, and is proud to sing and play with Bjarte Eike's Alehouse Boys.

thomasguthrie.com

Originally from Bath, **Claire Williams** studied piano and early keyboards at the Royal College of Music in London. She subsequently completed a Master's degree at Trinity College of Music, studying harpsichord and chamber organ with James Johnstone. From 2016 she held the Fellowship in Harpsichord/Continuo at the Royal College of Music for three consecutive years – the first person ever to do so.

Claire is much in demand as a continuo player and accompanist, and can occasionally be persuaded to give a solo recital. However, she feels most at home when playing as part of a group, and enjoys working with a wide and varied range of ensembles. She has performed in venues ranging from the intimacy of the Handel & Hendrix museum in London, to the expansive Royal Albert Hall, and everything in between.

Claire first became involved with BREMF as a student on the Early Music Live! Scheme in 2008 and has been a familiar face there ever since.

clairewilliams.co.uk

The performers

Space here alas does not permit the inclusion of biographies for all of our wonderful young artists, but you can find out more by clicking their names on the first page of the digital programme and following the hyperlinks to their websites where available.

Brighton Early Music Festival gratefully acknowledges support from Arts Council England and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport through the Culture Recovery Fund; the Garfield Weston Foundation; and the Ambache Charitable Trust – raising the profile of women composers.



Supported using public funding by
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