

FINAL REPORT TO FUNDERS ON MUSICA SECRETA, *MOTHER SISTER DAUGHTER*

May I start by thanking you very much for your generous grant, which has enabled us to complete our recording project, *Mother, Sister, Daughter*. This report will comprise three sections: project narrative, outcomes, and lessons learned.

Project narrative

We met all the project objectives – recording and four concerts – plus more besides.

Our original proposal contained several works that we did not eventually record, which were replaced by other repertoire by both anonymous and female creators. We removed the Dunstaple ‘Sicut malus’, the anonymous ‘Mater matris nati nata’ from Verona 760, and ‘Rogamus te’ - the longest of the three Leonora d’Este motets – because we were unable to rehearse them sufficiently with all the necessary personnel due to covid absences. We added instead the Missa de Beata Virgine from Verona 761 (which we had performed in concert in 2019), and two songs by Marguerite de Navarre and Martha Baerts, which we had originally intended only for the concerts and not the recording. The singers performed them respectively in Old French and Old Dutch, having sought out expert guidance in pronunciation.

The new repertoire enhanced the project in several ways. First, the Missa de Beata Virgine comes from a manuscript that contains a unique illumination of nuns standing around a choirbook. We made the decision to perform the mass from the choirbook, as in the manuscript, and the illumination appears in the CD packaging. The two songs allowed members of the ensemble to experiment with extemporised performance, as the words were published with instructions that they should be sung to existing song melodies, hence no notated versions exist. They are also the first cross-confessional repertoire that we have included in performance or recording. We felt that the new programme better reflected a greater range of European women’s music-making during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

I also made the decision to include more chant into the recording than I had previously thought – this was because the polyphonic antiphons of the Clare Vespers are pitched very high, and I thought that the listening experience on the CD could be a bit wearing. Therefore, I asked the singers to sing one antiphon each in the two sets of Vespers, and then the whole ensemble sang the doxologies together. I did not direct the singers to adopt a uniform approach to their solo antiphons, only when they were singing together. This meant that there were six different approaches to singing chant melodies in each set. Rather than sticking to a sense of uniform liturgy, what we have created is more of a narrative sacred drama, as the women tell each other the story of St Clare and her sister Agnes, and the foundation of their religious order (and this is, of course, precisely what exercised the bishops’ patience so sharply in the beginning of the sixteenth century).

Our original timeline extended between May 2021 and October 2022. There were cancellations, additions, and a major disruption due to covid.

Activity	Original date	Actual date
Commission of work by Jo Marsh	May 2021	May 2021
First rehearsals	July 2021	July 2021
Stapleford residency for new work	August 2021	August 2021*
Recording	October 2021*	March 2022*

Extra rehearsal to incorporate lectern	--	March 2022*
Film of concert	--	March 2022*
Concert, Stapleford Granary	--	March 2022*
Online concert, Bloomington Early Music	--	May 2022
Concert, Kings Place	June 2022	June 2022*
Concert, Stour Music	June 2022	June 2022*
Concert, Ashton Court	July/Aug 2022*	--
Online installation, Altpitch Festival	--	July 2022
Concert Little Missenden	October 2022	--
Concert Brighton Early Music Festival	--	October 2023

It is impossible to underestimate the impact of covid (activities explicitly affected by cancellation or deputising marked with * in the table): financial, artistic, and personal. Covid knocked out members at short notice (from a week to just 48 hours before) for nearly every rehearsal, the recording, and in the run up to every concert. The whole recording session was bumped from October 2021 to March 2022: a family member of one musician (who was key to the whole period, since we were recording in a village church close to her parents' house, and they were providing some accommodation and meals) went down with covid 48 hours before we were due to start, so we had to cancel the whole enterprise. The only new dates that were possible were six months later – yet when it came to the sessions, we had to replace one soprano at 48 hours' notice.

The financial ramifications were not insubstantial: we lost our deposit on booked accommodation in October, and the new location was much more expensive; the cost of organ hire and tuning went up from £900 to >£1500 because we had to find a different instrument and provider, plus three different tuners to cover; the venue hire went up by £400. We also then had no choice but to self-release the album, since we had a launch concert booked at Kings Place on 10 June, and we would not have been able to get a finished recording into record distributors' timetables, which need six months' lead time.

The uncertainty of the live music scene meant we lost two concerts – but we managed to replace them with a live event (Stapleford Granary) and two online events (Bloomington Early Music Festival in the US; Altpitch Festival in the UK). The opportunity to create a filmed concert for Bloomington, and then Altpitch (both of which were competitive tenders – one chosen by the BLEMF board, the other a public vote), encouraged us to use the choirbook lectern, but this needed an additional rehearsal for which three people were absent. Moreover, we were under pressure to film the concert during the only period we had during which we could all be free – the revised recording dates in April 2022.

We incurred considerable extra cost in accommodation and travel since we had to book deps at short notice. The administration was particularly stressful: finding musicians at short notice; creating new parts, annotating, and sending to deps (both those who were needed and those who ultimately weren't). We placed huge demands on the vocal deps to step into choirbook singing, and a new work. We are nonetheless very pleased with the way the concerts went – especially those in June. The music was very well received, and the audiences seemed genuinely delighted.

Funding and expenditure

External funding came from the Leche Trust; Ambache Charitable Trust; Huddersfield University; Altpitch Festival; Angel Early Music; our crowdfunder; and concert fees: total

£32,719. The overall expenditure for the project – commission, recording, film, concerts – was £40,302 (original budget £38,080); Musica Secreta’s total contribution from reserves was £7553. In order to keep costs to the organisation down, no payment has been made to Laurie Stras for any of her contribution, musical or administrative.

Outcomes

Concerts – in person

Stapleford Granary, 26 March 2022

Kings Place, 10 June 2022

Stour Music, 24 June 2022

Brighton Early Music Festival – booked for 22 October 2023

Concerts – online

Bloomington Early Music Festival, 23-28 May 2022

Online presence

Liturgy as Storytelling – blog on Women’s Song Forum

<https://www.womensongforum.org/2022/02/14/liturgy-as-womens-storytelling%EF%BF%BC/>

Altpitch Festival – <https://www.altpitch.org>, reusing film for Bloomington; scheduled July 2022

Album

500 manufactured; available as physical discs from Musica Secreta’s website, and as digital download on Bandcamp.

Digital distribution through RecordJet: Apple Music, Amazon Music, Spotify, and YouTube

PR – Nicky Thomas Media

Press

Feature in *Choir and Organ* (print, June 2022); the *Tablet* (print, August 2022); *Gramophone* blog (June 2022); In Tune (BBC R3, June 2022)

Reviews so far

EarlyMusicReviews+: “The singing was very effective in recreating the possible sound of a mixed group of nuns singing in their cloistered chapels, each voice having its own timbre but combining well”;

The Observer: “The six female singers have a lightness and flexibility of tone; three instrumentalists (playing organ, harps and viol) add supportive variety. The disc also includes the group’s first commission: The Veiled Sisters by Joanna Marsh, an empathetic, soaring setting of two contrasting texts exploring the enclosed life.”

For more, see videos on <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqxo11Wmfk-KFHwTTvX8rmg>
Spotify:

<https://open.spotify.com/album/67dLtdjv3F88jywJzlbsTO?si=Ym65w4c4QTyLiOzgdXuA-A>

Apple Music: <https://music.apple.com/gb/album/mother-sister-daughter/1626490760>

Bandcamp <https://musicasecreta.bandcamp.com/releases>

Lessons learned

Budgeting

We need to build in much more contingency because who knows what the future holds for live music. We also need to include lines for session photography and more videography. This in turn means extra rehearsal in nice surroundings, specifically scheduled for video; and we need to build in time in the recording/rehearsal schedules specifically for photography/videography.

Crowdfunding

This was successful and essential to the funding of the project, but a tremendous amount of work. We first used crowdfunding in 2015, and we did not have a coordinated campaign. This time, we had much more content to share, social media posting etc – but it seems that so many ensembles are now using crowdfunding to pay for recordings, it is difficult to achieve the same level of engagement/excitement that was once possible with this method.

Social media

This is endless. Utterly endless. It can absorb much more time than ever anticipated – but if running a crowdfunder (before project completion) and the main distribution is via digital outlets (after project completion), it seems like it is absolutely necessary. Using Buffer (cross-platform scheduled content/post publishing) is a good way to reduce time and ensure consistency. However, keeping costs down by using the free version limits its functions.

Self-release vs record company

This represented a huge learning curve, and I'm not sure I'm anywhere near the top yet. The right choice feels like an unknowable: no physical distribution deal with Naxos means much less physical market penetration, but there is no way to recoup any costs on the tiny, tiny margins of a record company deal. WRT *digital self-release*, there is definitely room for rethinking away from producing 80-minute CD-ready projects towards smaller, more regular releases, perhaps still based around specific projects or themes. *Physical self-release* is expensive, environmentally costly, and very time-consuming. However, it is still necessary to have physical product on gigs – though we might consider pressing only 300 next time. It was a delight to feel that we had license to create the sort of physical product that we would enjoy holding and with which we would want to engage.

Logistics

We should consider finding time/space to do a “development day” for prospective deps/new members using the choirbook lectern. We could perhaps base a new project (inc. short films?) around using choirbook – technique and tips for including instruments, as well.

Marketing

There was a failure of activity here, but down to personal circumstance for our chosen marketing professional. We need to think this through anew every time: what do we need to market? When? What do we want to achieve? How much are we willing to pay?

Laurie Stras
15 July 2022