

When I started Sub Rosa in Toronto, Canada in 2017, I would never have imagined the project would get as far as Oxford. I started planning concerts of early music written for and by religious women simply because I did not see this rich resource being programmed in concerts anywhere around me, and I thought it needed to be heard by more people. Caroline Lesemann-Elliott and I met in Triora, Italy, at a convent music choral workshop, and decided to co-direct this project when I emigrated to the UK to begin my PhD in Musicology.

Since its inception, Sub Rosa has been dedicated to bringing underrepresented music to a wider audience, with a focus on feminist discourse and community outreach. We were previously limited, however, by minimal funds based on a small pool of donations. This made venues, marketing, and compensating artists for their hard work a considerable challenge. As we sought to establish the ensemble in a competitive field, and within the new restrictions of the pandemic, we knew grants would be a key component of our goals.

This is why we were so thrilled that Angel Early Music believes in our project and was willing to so generously support our UK premiere. We combined our research interests to produce a diverse concert featuring sacred and secular music from northern Italy in the first half, and music from English convents in exile in the second half. Our selections of poetry, letters and anecdotes, all written around the same time and place as the music, were deeply personal choices. By pairing poetry with music throughout the concert, we hoped listeners unfamiliar with this sound-world could understand the holistic context and very human aspects of sacred music written long ago.

It was thrilling to work alongside renowned Oxford-based musicians; to see our colleagues discover this music for the first time through their own performance, and to develop our own understanding of this rich, nuanced repertoire alongside them, was truly astonishing. We were extremely fortunate to assemble a team who was committed to bringing underrepresented music to life for the benefit of modern audiences. Without AEM's generous funding, we would not have been able to book venues and rehearsal spaces, build our marketing presence, and schedule sufficient rehearsal time to fine-tune such complex music. After more than a year practicing at home in small spaces, we found the electric vividness of our singing almost jarring in the generous acoustic of Christ Church Cathedral; we remembered that much of this music was written to fill such large spaces, and intended for women who were otherwise cut off from the world as cloistered nuns to make their voices heard in the public sphere.

This was our first live concert since the pandemic. We've always tried not to take our profession for granted, but this unprecedented situation threw the immense privilege of these projects into sharp relief. To receive funding as a fledgling ensemble in such difficult circumstances was a breath of fresh air, a weight lifted off our shoulders. We have been honoured to have the opportunity to share this repertoire in such a central and important venue as Christ Church Cathedral, and were humbled by the incredible support not only from friends, family, and the concert-going public, but especially from Angel Early Music.

Thank you!

Eliza-Jane Cassey and Caroline Lesemann-Elliott

Sub Rosa Co-Directors