

# Soprano's vocal fireworks give Boca Symphonia a joyful afternoon of Baroque

January 16, 2017 By Greg Stepanich



Sherezade Panthaki.

The European audiences of 300 years ago liked their singers to show off, and Jan. 8 at the second seasonal concert by the Symphonia Boca Raton, a local audience got a thrilling example of why that was.

In all-Baroque program led by conductor Brett Karlin, who in November directed a strong account of the Mass in B Minor of J.S. Bach with his Master Chorale of South Florida, singer Sherezade Panthaki sang arias by Handel and Vivaldi, and was the soloist in a Bach solo cantata.

Panthaki, who appeared with the Master Chorale two years ago in music of Mozart and Buxtehude, showed further growth in disciplining the outer reaches of her powerful voice. What she demonstrates now is a big, resonant instrument that can be heard with ease above an orchestra, and an impressive command of Baroque fioritura. One got the impression during the concert at the Roberts Theater that she could easily have sung another cantata or two without tiring.

She was paired often that Sunday with trumpeter Jeffrey Kaye, the Symphonia's artistic director, who was in very fine embouchure fettle all afternoon. In "Let the Bright Seraphim," the first of three arias by Handel, Panthaki and Kaye set a strong, virtuosic tone, with Kaye's playing crisp, mellifluous and accurate, and Panthaki seizing the star-singer mantle with buoyancy and forcefulness. The familiar "Lascia ch'io piangia" was heartfelt and tender, and in "Da tempeste," a showpiece from the opera *Giulio Cesare*, Panthaki was in blockbuster mode again, spinning off line after even line of melismas.

Her singing brought much of the audience to its feet, and there were shouts of "Bravo," turning the Roberts temporarily into an opera house.

After the intermission, the soprano led off the second half with more pyrotechnics, this time for the aria “Alma oppressa” from Vivaldi’s opera *La Fida Ninfa*. This aria has a much more violent, minor-key emotional temperature, and it gave Panthaki the opportunity to indulge her aptitude for drama, beginning as she did with a stern entrance and cranking up the heat after that. Her breath control in the many non-stop 16th-note pages in this aria were most impressive, and the performance engendered another episode of fervent audience acclaim.

The final work on the program was the solo cantata *Jauchzet Gott in allen Landen* (BWV 51) of Johann Sebastian Bach, which also includes a prominent part for the solo trumpet. In one sense, this work is actually more difficult than the bravura arias in that Bach’s vocal lines are written as though they were for an orchestral instrument, with great precision called for even at high rates of speed, such as in the concluding “Alleluja.” And then the singer must also shift focus and bring off a long, serious, meditative aria in “Höchster, mache deine Güte,” whose somber tone does not come with any real letup in vocal complexity.

To all this Panthaki was more than equal, with only a slightly squawked high C in the “Alleluja” to betray the huge effort it takes to sing this cantata with any mastery. And sing it with mastery she did. Kaye played the brilliant outer movement parts with sparkling accuracy, and the result was a really fine reading of this work, forthright and joyous and a delight to hear.

Karlin led his forces with energy and crispness, and the reduced forces on stage made for a very able Baroque ensemble. The orchestra itself was featured in two separate sets of well-played movements from Handel’s *Water Music* suites; hornists Greg Miller and Eva Conti did a standout job with their prominent roles in particular.

Also on the program but not listed was a string orchestra arrangement of “L’Egyptien,” one of many colorful keyboard pieces by Jean-Philippe Rameau. This got a very forceful performance, dark and aggressive, which was somewhat at odds with the gentle melancholy of the composer’s style.

Karlin, an enthusiast for the Baroque period (he gave an interesting few minutes of remarks about the original meaning of the term early in the concert), conducted with real enthusiasm and got excellent results. So much so that an annual appearance with the Symphonia in this repertoire would be something to look forward to every season.

*The Symphonia Boca Raton’s next concert, on Feb. 19, will be an all-French program led by Alastair Willis and featuring pianist Lindsay Garritson in the Ravel Piano Concerto in G. Music by Ibert, Honegger, Debussy, Bizet and Fauré rounds out the program. Call 376-3848 or visit [www.thesymphonia.org](http://www.thesymphonia.org) for tickets or more information.*