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Early Music Now's Galileo's Daughters

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Galileo's Daughters, presented Saturday by Early Music Now.

The term “Renaissance man” (or woman) persists today because of the accomplishments of the artist-scientists of the 14th through 17th centuries. Leonardo da Vinci was a visual artist as well as a scientist. Michelangelo was a prolific poet, sculptor, painter, and architect. And Galileo Galilei, the subject of Saturday Early Music Now program, received the inspiration for many of his scientific ideas from his early work as an assistant to his father, a lute-maker and music theorist.

EMN presented Galileo's Daughters, an ensemble offering an unusual blend of history, science and music. Dava Sobel narrative delved into the history of astronomy and its relationship to music up to and beyond the theories proposed by Galileo in the 1600s. Images of the heavens, flowing water and the contours of the planets filled a screen on stage. Each of the seven parts of the program was punctuated by pieces composed by Galileo's contemporaries, performed with luminous clarity by soprano Sarah Pillow, Mary Anne Ballard on viola da gamba and Ronn McFarland on lute and theorbo (bass lute).

While her content was interesting and well-researched, Sobel's delivery came a little too close to lecture-hall academics at times. And the visuals made a lovely effect, but some identification of the planets and galaxies featured would have been welcome.

The musicians were outstanding. Their sound, unamplified, rang beautifully under the domed ceiling of the Helen Bader Concert Hall in UWM's Zelazo Center.

Although she spoke of her background in modern styles like jazz and blues, Sarah Pillows clear soprano perfectly captured the bell-like straight tones and unearthly tremolos and trills of Renaissance style. Her reading of Monteverdi's “Lamento d'Ariane” was an exquisite blend of the pure tones and dramatic flourishes.

The viola da gamba can be temperamental and hard to tune. However, Mary Anne Ballard drew singing beauty instrument and poignant inflection from the instrument.

Robb McFarlane impressed with his agility and sensitivity on the lute, in both the Renaissance pieces and his own compositions.

Once again, Early Music Now brought to Milwaukee performers who present music that might be perceived as antiquated or irrelevant in a context that clarifies some of the its history and culture at no loss of passion and poetry.

Trio performs program from Galileo's lifetime

By David Lewellen
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At first glance, the idea of a theme concert of music from Galileo's time seems a bit gimmicky.

But the early-music group Galileo's Daughters showed that everything fit together smoothly at Early Music Now's first concert of the season Saturday night.

The ancient world considered music, mathematics and astronomy to be closely related disciplines, as we hear in the enduring phrase "the music of the spheres." And the scientific revolution of the 1600s unfolded as music was discovering new styles and expressions in the shift from the Renaissance to the Baroque periods.

Even today, talents for math and music often overlap - as they did in Galileo's father, a mathematician who conducted experiments in the physical basis of harmony. The piece on Saturday's program by Vincenzo Galilei suggested that his gifts may have been in theory rather than composition.

The group that performed at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Zelazo Center included soprano Sarah Pillow, viola da gambist Mary Anne Ballard and lutenist Ronn McFarlane. Dava Sobel, author of the popular book "Galileo's Daughter," narrated the musical and scientific developments of the astronomer's time.

The musicians performed as a true trio, not voice with accompaniment. All were well-versed in the swooping, sighing intensity of the period; tempos were flexible, but always together.

Pillow got the maximum dramatic results out of her light soprano voice, singing in fine Baroque style and with plenty of emphatic, communicative phrasing. Ballard and McFarlane, in addition to stylistic sensitivity, drew rich, full-bodied sound from their instruments.

The high point of the evening was the leaping, exultant "Laudate dominum" by Monteverdi, the greatest composer of the early Baroque period, who (I now know) was almost an exact contemporary of Galileo.

The very short and more sparsely attended second half of the concert included two original pieces for lute by McFarlane. They did carry on the idea of music as a living art form practiced by composer-performers, but offered few striking ideas; performed on a piano, it would have sounded like a movie soundtrack.

The lute, however, turned out to be a pretty good accompaniment to Pillow's rendition of "My Funny Valentine" and her bluesy scat-singing that ended the evening.