

# COMPOSERS REDISCOVERED

MICHELENE WANDOR ON *SALAMONE ROSSI*

**R**ossi was a Jewish composer who lived and worked in Mantua between c.1570 and 1628. Like many other musicians of this period, his work lay neglected until it was edited towards the end of the 19th century in Paris. Then, as the early music movement grew, and as scholars researched and began again to perform his extraordinary repertoire, interest in Rossi gradually came to the surface.

For me the discovery of his music came via a different route. I earn my living predominantly as a writer, but in the past 15 years I have become more and more involved with the pre-classical repertoire, first as a recorder player and then as player of the viola da gamba. In 1989, through a mixture of foolhardiness and determination, I went to Trinity College of Music where, as a 'mature' student, I completed a performers' course.

As I learned about and played the music of the period, I became aware of a curious subjective dissonance. Some of the most beautiful sounds of the time were written for the Catholic, or for the emerging Protestant, liturgy. While my musical self was drawn to these sounds, my cultural self was reminded of my school days, when I sang hymns in school assembly. I liked the tunes, but when I came to words like 'Christ' or 'Jesus' or 'Holy Ghost', I either mouthed something else, or simply dropped out of the hymn for as many notes as were necessary. The music felt as if it belonged to me, the words did not. Since words are the glue, the binding, the main indicators of meaning in music, they could not be ignored. I began to wonder if there were any Jewish composers. So, when I came across modern editions of some of Rossi's trio sonatas, I was impelled to explore more. I read everything I could lay my hands on, I chased

up facsimiles of his scores, and began to perform concerts of his music. In 1999 the first biography and analysis of Rossi's music was published by Don Harran, placing him firmly and importantly within musical history.

Rossi was a contemporary of Monteverdi, and, from surviving documentary evidence, it is clear that they collaborated on music commissioned by the Gonzaga court, that they performed together, and there is even speculation that Rossi may have led the band for the first performance of Monteverdi's opera, *Orfeo*, in 1607.

In recent musical histories, Rossi is generally acknowledged as a pioneer in the form of the trio sonata – the newest instrumental form of the time, consisting of two treble voices over a flexible bass line. Where Renaissance music focused on polyphonic (multi-voiced) composition, Baroque music developed the foundations of the kind of 'classical' music most people are used to today. In histories of Jewish music, Rossi is also seen as a pioneer, in his settings of 33 Hebrew texts to Italianate polyphony. These were published in Italy in 1622-23, and were the subject of some debate, since they challenged the proscription of music in synagogue services. To these two examples of musical 'firsts' we can add the fact that Rossi was the first Mantuan composer to publish collections of purely instrumental music. Altogether he published 13 collections, some of which were reprinted elsewhere in Europe, some of which were copied into anthologies of contemporary music, and some of which reached England and influenced early 17th century madrigal composers.

For listeners already comfortable with baroque music, Rossi's accomplished *oeuvre* will be a delight; small-scale, exquisitely dramatic settings of



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Italian texts; virtuoso instrumental pieces, and devotional settings of Hebrew texts. But his 'sound' is typically northern Italian, and nothing like those developed later by Sephardi, Ashkenazi or even Klezmer influenced repertoire. He challenges all sorts of musical and cultural categories: Renaissance/Baroque, Jewish/Italian, sacred/secular. We have here a composer whose Jewishness cannot be easily appropriated, whilst at the same time we can celebrate the importance of his contribution to musical history. ■

Micheline Wandor is a poet, playwright, critic, broadcaster, musician and leader of the early music group, *Siena Ensemble*. She is currently writing a novel about Salamone Rossi and Claudio Monteverdi.

*Siena Ensemble* will be performing Rossi's music on Sunday 3 November at the LJCC. See *WHAT'S HAPPENING* page 24.

*The Ensemble's CD SALAMONE ROSSI HEBREO MANTOVANO*, made with the help of a JMI Millenium Award, is available to JR Readers at the discounted price of £8, post-free, from Micheline Wandor, 71 Belsize Lane, London NW3 5AU. Any queries, contact [mwandor@compuserve.com](mailto:mwandor@compuserve.com)