

EARLY Music

A M E R I C A

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New Double Star: Asteria

A Nuns Story: Concerts in Old Brno

Education: University of North Texas

Silver Anniversary: Boston Camerata

Musical Art in Miniature: Cambridge (UK)

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Photo: William Stickney

Asteria Reaches for the Stars

As they prepare for a debut at the Boston Early Music Festival, the winners of the EMA Medieval/Renaissance Music Competition talk about their formation and their dreams for the future

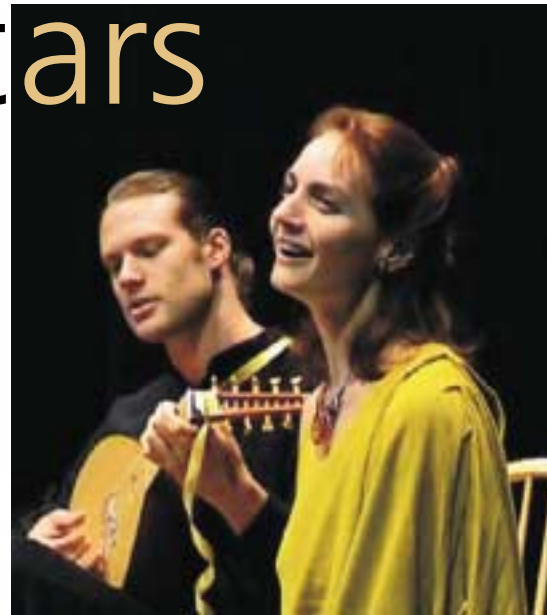
By Mark Powell

PERHAPS THE STARS had one fate in mind when Sylvia Rhyne first established herself as a singer of musical theater and when Eric Redlinger was drawn to the composition of atonal music. But the stars moved, bringing them both into the world of early music and guiding their duo Asteria to victory in Early Music America's 2004 Medieval/Renaissance Music Competition.

In this event, the duo competed live against five other ensembles on October 6, 2004, in New York City, performing a program of 15th-century Burgundian songs by Guillaume Dufay and his contemporaries. They received a \$5,000 cash prize and will be presented in a performance sponsored by Early Music America at the Boston Early Music Festival on Friday, June 19.

Asteria was incubated under the wings of another early music group, the Renaissance Street Singers of New York, directed by John Hetland. That group has sung *a cappella* 15th- and 16th-century music on the sidewalks and in the public spaces of New York City since 1973. Although Rhyne and Redlinger are both aspiring professional musicians, they were both deeply attracted to this largely amateur group.

"Everyone loves it," says Rhyne, who has sung with the group for several years. "Everyone cares very much about the music, discussing at great length this or that detail in the scores. Every couple of weeks we go out on the streets and sing for free into a public space, where the music can be performed for passers by who wouldn't normally have this music in their life." In the Renaissance Street Singers, Rhyne likewise found someone who wouldn't normally be in her life: Eric Redlinger.



While Rhyne was out of town for several weeks for a musical theater gig, Redlinger joined the group. When she returned to New York, she met her future partner at an RSS rehearsal. At that first meeting, he blurted out "I have a lute." Rhyne was struck right away. "You have a lute! I have to see it," she exclaimed. A romance followed, not only for each other, but also for the kind of music Redlinger was exploring in his own research, the 15th-century Burgundian love songs by Dufay and his contemporaries.

Rhyne and Redlinger met regularly before RSS rehearsals. "We would get together and sit in Central Park to work on the music." Finally, with some encouragement from friends and family, they gave a public concert in 2002, and Asteria was born.

By any other name

While Asteria's mission is to seek out the narrative quality and emotional intimacy of late Medieval and early Renaissance music, their name (Greek for "the stars," as in the English word "asterisk") was chosen because it didn't necessarily call to mind early music. "It was a long



“These songs are windows into the ‘peak moments’ can be filled with great joy or great

search; just as, when you’re having a baby, you take a long time to come up with a name.” At the time, no other musical Asterias existed, although in the time since, several other groups have christened themselves with the name, including a punk band. By having an identity that didn’t sound too “early music,” Redlinger and Rhyne sought to break down barriers and prejudices about the repertoire. “We are very aware of the early music style, and we feel confident that we can do something special within it,” says Redlinger.

“It’s passion that I love most about this music,” says Rhyne. “The poetry is just extraordinary, and I feel the music reflects it beautifully. Earlier, I would have thought of passionate music as coming only from the 19th century, with huge orchestras thundering at you. But somehow this music awakens so much more passion in me because of the interweaving of the different melodies, the counterpoint – I find it an ultimately satisfying experience.

“I come from musical theater, and musical theater is all about the same

thing, expressing the text through the music, showing what a person is going through at that moment. The poet and musician each wrote from a very deep place, and it’s my hope to reflect this, so that how I perform comes from an equally deep place in myself.”

Rhyne doesn’t have formal training in so-called “method acting” but says that, when performing, she hopes to work with “the times in your life when you felt the same way as the poet/composer. These songs are windows into the ‘peak moments’ of life, and even the quietest moment can be filled with great joy or great sorrow.”

Eric Redlinger’s musical story began with one of those “peak moments”: studying composition at Middlebury College in Vermont, where he wrote twelve-tone, electro-acoustic, and other experimental music. He was encouraged not to study much tonal repertoire. But as he read more about the composers he admired from the Second Viennese School, such as Berg, Schoenberg, and Webern, they all seemed to say that one should go back, for inspiration, to Common Practice tonality and the music of the Renaissance and Medieval periods. “So I immersed myself in Renaissance and Medieval music and heard recordings by Gothic Voices, Pomerium, etc.” He was hooked. After Middlebury, he studied singing and lute at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis. Back in the States, he looked for someone with whom to make this music. “I was spoiled in Europe; people interested in this music were all around me. So when I returned to New York, I started Googling and went to various auditions, and ironically what I found I liked best was an amateur group – but it really met the spirit of what I wanted to express through music, especially its intimacy and immediacy for the audience.”

Sylvia Rhyne concurs. “He’d been



At the reception following EMA's Medieval/ Renaissance Music Competition, EMA executive director Maria Coldwell congratulates Eric Redlinger.

of life, and even the quietest moment
sorrow." – Sylvia Rhyne

eager to work with a partner who interprets the music the way he does," says Rhyne. "We found out pretty quickly that we both felt the same way about it."

Redlinger is committed to his chosen approach to performance. "I wanted to break out of the 'early music' scene, which seemed to de-emphasize any element of personal interpretation." Rhyne agrees: "It's doing a disservice to the art if you let some sort of top-down idea of how the music should be performed control your interpretation."

Asked what advice they would give other performers, Rhyne and Redlinger offered similar counsel. "Memorize everything so that you are absolutely 'there' with the audience," says Redlinger. And from Rhyne: "Play or sing in such a way that expresses what you feel about this music."

Two and counting

The group is a duo for the moment, but that might change. "We are content to stay with just two voices and the lute for now," Rhyne says, "but we are interested in expanding the repertoire eventually to include more voices and more instruments as the music demands."

Their next major projects are the Boston Early Music Festival performance, featuring both music from their current recording, *Le Souvenir de Vous me Tue*, and new repertoire and a new CD recording in the autumn of more music of the same period. As Redlinger also has experience in multimedia presentations, they hope they "can convey something of the original setting – using scenery, lighting, and other devices – that will enable the audience to have a visual idea of the original surroundings of this music."

They have dreams of performing in the actual historical surroundings someday. Rhyne says, "I would love to perform this music in Europe in the places

it was originally performed. There are some possibilities for a European concert tour in Italy; we have some friends there, so we'll see."

Doubtless, they will continue to make friends as their touring schedule gets busier. Redlinger's mother, who has been involved in early music for a long time, first alerted the couple to the competition and has since taken on the role of manager of the group, booking them into venues in the Northeast. But they are not content to perform only for live audiences locally; they are already expanding their audience worldwide by making their music available at the internet site Magnatune.com.

"We are in an interesting age for markets that are not mainstream." That's why Asteria appears on Magnatune. "They are really ahead of their time," says Redlinger. He likes the community aspect that Magnatune offers, and he has developed a parallel web site that includes scores, "treatises on how to play the music on the lute, and what we think about this music. When you buy the album, you can access the scores, cover art, and a blog area where you can talk to us. You automatically have a community, and I think this represents the future. My friends don't want a CD anymore; they want to download [music and] put in on their iPod. If you have a CD, you rip it and give the piece of plastic to your mother."

The online community creates leads for live audience members to hear the actual concerts, linking artist and audience virtually, then actually. "The closer you feel to the artists, and through the artists to the label, the more likely you are to consider the artists friends and support them," says Redlinger. 🍷

Mark Powell is director of marketing for Early Music America and sings with Cappella Romana and The Tudor Choir.

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