

Apollo's Fire: catching up with soprano Amanda Forsythe

by Daniel Hathaway



Just a year ago, Boston-based soprano Amanda Forsythe dazzled Apollo's Fire audiences with memorable performances in "Mozart and Papa Haydn". Writing for this publication about arias she sang from the young Mozart's *Lucio Silla* in Finney Chapel at Oberlin, Nicholas Jones said, "Ms. Forsythe gave us a rendition of pyrotechnics...that convinced us of its value, even as we recognized the immaturity of the composer. Staccato arpeggios, long legato lines, a mad scene with its requisite oddities — all were entirely enthralling."

Not long after that, Forsythe knocked the sox off Boston audiences with her triumphant appearances as Edilia in the 17-year old Handel's first-ever opera, *Almira*, at the Boston Early Music Festival in June. The *Wall Street Journal* critic wrote, "Rage arias steadily gathered steam and exploded: In "Proverai," she unleashed her fury at the fickle Osman in a torrent of roulades; she reeled him in with her voice and her body, pretending to kiss him, then commandeered his sword and threatened him with it and an even higher and wilder cascade of ornaments."

We [interviewed](#) Amanda Forsythe last year before her Cleveland area performances but wanted to catch up with her again before she returns to sing and record arias by Handel and Rameau with Apollo's Fire from April 24-27. We reached her by phone at her home in Cambridge where she juggles her career as a much-in-demand early music soprano with her role as wife and mother of two boys, ages two and four. Her husband, Edward Elwyn Jones, is organist of Harvard University.

Daniel Hathaway: First, congratulations on your success with Almira. I saw the show with my colleagues of the Music Critics Association and was blown away both by the production and by your singing.

Amanda Forsythe: It's probably one of the top three shows that I've ever done. Gilbert [Blin, the stage director,] is kind of a genius. People had been disparaging about the music, probably based on a terrible CD that came out ten years ago, but I thought it was very engaging, and clearly Handel. We may remount it in Europe in a couple of seasons. Everyone felt it was one of the most special things they had ever done, and it would be a shame to never do it again.

DH: I understand there was a rather grueling rehearsal schedule.

AF: European companies usually have six weeks of rehearsal. We had three. Every day there were rehearsals from 10 to 1, 2 to 5 and 7 to 10, seven days a week. The evenings were run-throughs of everything that had been rehearsed during the day. Of course I didn't have to be at every rehearsal, but it was really intense for the director and the continuo players. By the time we got to the dress rehearsals we had probably done the whole opera a dozen times already.

DH: Do you now qualify as the Queen of the Rage Aria?

AF: Edilia has some good arias. I really like that character. When we did Niobe, she was a really rageful character with not much more to her. I thought that was a terrible fit. But the Princess is not a bad person. She just knew what she wanted, and I could find a little bit of that in myself.

DH: What was next for you after Almira?

AF: I went to Italy to sing at the Rossini Festival in Pesaro in a very exciting production of *William Tell*. It was five and a half hours long! I got to play a boy for the first time — William Tell's son.

DH: Did they shoot an apple off your head?

AF: Yes! There was an explosive device in the apple. It was kind of a terrifying production for me with a lot of scary things I had to do, like climb the world's tallest flight of stairs and pour petrol all over a table and light it on fire. There's a [promo](#) they made because they recorded it for DVD. The dress rehearsal was on a super-humid day and I went through twenty matches trying to set fire to the table! But it was a wonderful experience to sing with the superstar tenor Juan Diego Flórez, who is very personable. And I brought the whole family along. Ed had the boys on the beach every day.

DH: How does it feel switching from Handel to Rossini?

AF: My repertory is about 90% baroque. I can count on knowing at least five people in the orchestra wherever I'm singing — that's how small this world is — and that makes things comfortable. But Pesaro is full of singers who only do Big-O Opera and travel around singing a handful of roles. I always feel a little bit of a fraud!

DH: What's next after Cleveland?

AF: This year it's Handel, Handel, Handel, but some arias I haven't done before. I'm doing some C.P.E. Bach, which is brilliant. Unlike his father, he gives you room to breathe. His arias are hard but they fit my voice so well. I'll also be singing Handel with Portland Baroque and touring to Moscow and Rome with the Accademia Santa Cecilia. I'll do a *Serva Padrona* with Boston Early Music Festival, a recording of *Agrippina* with Boston Baroque this spring, then performances of *Teseo* with Philharmonia Baroque at Tanglewood and Mostly Mozart and I'll make my Seattle Opera debut as Iris in *Semele*.

I've had to cut back because of the kids — it's just too hard. While I'm in Cleveland for ten days rehearsing, performing and recording, Ed's parents have come over from Wales and my parents moved to Lexington a few years ago. That will give the grandparents the opportunity to make special bonds — that's what I tell myself anyway, so I don't feel guilty!

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