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Les Canards Chantants

February 10, 2017

Sex, Drugs, & Madrigals

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Molly Netter, soprano
Eric Brenner, countertenor
Robin Bier, alto
Owen McIntosh, tenor
Jacob Perry, tenor
Graham Bier, bass

Richard Stone, theorbo

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Translations

Giunto m' à Amor – Nulla posso levar

(Francesco Petrarca, Sonnet 171 from *Canzoniere*)

Love has caught me in a lovely harsh embrace,
That kills unjustly: and if I complain
He doubles my hurt: then it's better to be
As I used to, dying of love and silent.
She'd burn the Rhine however deeply frozen
With her eyes, and shatter all its sharp rocks:
And she has pride equal to her beauty,
So that she regrets pleasing others.

I cannot soften that lovely diamond
With my wit, or that heart so hard:
The rest is marble that moves and breathes:
Nor with all her disdain, nor her dark looks,
Can she ever take my hope away from me,
Nor ever take away my sweet sighs.

Sopra la morte d'Adriano

(Antonio Molino, 'Manoli Blessi')

O rocks, piles, sandbanks of the Adriatic shore;
sea-weeds, reeds, grasses that are there;
islets, marshes, cays that hide
the oyster, the cockle and the gentle flounder;
and you, fish of the valley and of every stream
and of the sea, whether large or small;
mackerel, shad, anchovies that pass this way;
sirens, both maidens and married;

And you, rivers that pay tribute to the sea,
Piave, Adige, Po, Sile, Brenta and Oglio,
come hither every one to lament
the death of Adrian, for whom I mourn,
who will no longer be able to set my verses to music
with the sweetest song that shatters every reef.
Oh great sorrow!

In the whole world, who will now be the one
who can emulate him in harmony?

Spente eran nel mio cor l'antiche fiamme —————

(Giacomo Sannazzaro)

Extinguished in my heart were the old flames
And from so long and continuous war
from my enemy I was hoping for peace;
When, while leaving the beloved woods
I felt myself restrained by a strong snare,
Which behoved me to change both my life and my style.

My tongue can never tell, nor my style,
How many piercing thorns, how many flames
there were around that perilous snare:
whence I, descrying the signs of another war,
Thought to take refuge again in my woods,
As soon as I despaired of obtaining peace.

O cruel stars, now give me peace,
And you, Fortune, change your cruel style:
give me back to the shepherds and the woods,
To my first song, to those accustomed flames;
For I am not strong enough to sustain the war
That Cupid wages on me with his merciless snare.

Zefiro torna – Ma per me, lasso! —————

(Francesco Petrarca, Sonnet 310, *Canzoniere*)

And the flowers and grass, his sweet family,
And Procne's chirps and Philomel's lament,
And Spring, snow white and vermilion.
The meadows laugh, and the sky brightens;
Jove delights to behold his daughter;
Air, water and earth are full of love;
Every creature reconciles itself to loving.

But for me, alas! return the heaviest
Sighs, which from my heart's depths
draws she who took the keys with her to heaven;

And birdsong and the blooming of the fields
And the graces of faithful and beautiful women
Are a desert and a bitter savagery of beasts.

Lamento della Ninfa —————

(Ottavio Rinuccini)

The Sun had not brought
The day to the world yet,
When a maiden
Went out of her dwelling.

On her pale face
Grief could be seen,
Often from her heart
A deep sigh was drawn.

Thus, treading upon flowers,
She wandered, now here, now there,
And lamented her lost loves
Like this:

“O Love” she said,
Gazing at the sky, as she stood
“Where’s the fidelity
That the deceiver promised?”

Poor her!

“Make my love come back
As he used to be
Or kill me, so that
I will not suffer anymore.”

Poor her! She cannot bear
All this coldness!

“I don’t want him to sigh any longer
But if he’s far from me.
No! He will not make me suffer
Anymore, I swear!”

“He’s proud
Because I languish for him.
Perhaps if I fly away from him
He will come to pray to me again.”

“If her eyes are more serene
Than mine,
O Love, she does not hold in her heart
A fidelity so pure as mine.”

“And you will not receive from those lips
Kisses as sweet as mine,
Nor softer. Oh, don’t speak!
Don’t speak! you know better than that!”

So amidst disdainful tears,
She spread her crying to the sky;
Thus, in the lovers’ hearts
Love mixes fire and ice.

Canzonetta da Bambini

[Men:] Let’s go to school, little boys.
Little Jacob, Graham, and you, dear little Robin,
did you hear what little Owen said?
That our noble ‘father’,
just now with madam ‘mother’,
has told the teacher to give us
a good spanking if we come late.
Let’s walk, singing.
‘A little bird jumped into a little cage.
Tell me the truth, what boat is this?’
No, no, let’s do this other one:
‘Big Britches has gone to the palace
with his sword under his arm
to get satisfaction.
They have caught and tied up Big Britches.’
The song is finished.
Good day Madam Teacher, and to the class.

Now that we are at school,
everyone with his desk
in front of the teacher,
let's go, everybody!

[Miss Netter:] Speak, Graham, and with you little Robin;
you say it with Owen, little Jacob, and you, little Eric.

Now everybody in a contest,
begin to recite.

[Men:] Dear madam teacher
make us all learn well.

ABCDEFGHIJKLMN OPQRSTUVWXYZ,
et, cum, orum!

Now give a drink to a poor man.

Io mi son giovinetta

(anonymous, after Giovanni Boccaccio)

“I am young,
and I laugh and sing to the new season”
sang my sweet shepherdess,
when suddenly in response to this song
my own heart sang, as a joyfully winging bird:
“I too am young, and I laugh and sing
to the gentle and beautiful spring of Love
that blossoms in your lovely eyes.”
And she: “Flee, if you are wise,” said she,
“from this ardor, flee, for in these eyes
it will never be springtime for you.”

Sfogava con le stelle

(Ottavio Rinuccini)

Crying to the stars, a love-sick man
spoke of his grief beneath the night sky,
and said, whilst gazing at them:
“Oh, lovely images of my idol that I adore,
if only, as you show me her rare beauty when you shine,
you could show to her my ardent flames,
with your golden look you would make her compassionate,
just as you compel me to love.”

S'un sguardo un fa beato —————

If in looking one can be blessed,
then imagine my state – lovers, hear! –
when I stole with these bold lips a sweet...
... ah, I cannot tell you; lest she be angry.

Dispietata pietate —————

(Torquato Tasso, from *Aminta*)

Devoid of pity, were you, Dafne,
truly, when you withheld the dart:
because when my death comes,
more bitter it will be, the more delayed it is.
And why are you embroiling me,
in such diverse ways and reasons, in vain?
What do you fear?
Do you fear I will not kill myself?
Do you fear my love?
Alas, let me die in such great pain.

Dunque addio, care selve —————

(Giovanni Battista Guarini, *Il Pastor Fido*, Atto IV, scene v)

Therefore farewell, dear forests,
farewell my dear woods, receive these my last sighs,
until, released from unjust and violent iron,
my cold shadow returns
to your beloved shades,
which in excruciating hell
can no longer rediscover innocence
nor any longer remain blessed,
despairing and woeful.

Asciugate I begli occhi —————

Dry those lovely eyes,
ah, my love, do not weep,
if, far from you, you see me wandering.
Alas, that I must weep alone and in misery,
for in leaving you, the pain kills me.

Gioco del conte

(Banchieri)

The gentlemen propose a word game to pass the time.

To pass the time, lovely ladies, let's play a game.

We all agree: you start and we'll follow.

Here's a good one, let's see who can do it.

What's the game? Come on, tell us!

We'll say a tongue-twister; you have to repeat it without a mistake.

Go on, then, we're ready!

"On the bridge by the fountain stood a count: in the fountain fell the bridge
and the count broke his brow."

"On the bridge on the count's brow stood a bridge..."

Wrong, now you have to pay a forfeit."

"On the fountain bridge count..."

Pay up!

(a clock chimes)

That's one . . .that's two. . .that's three...it's three o'clock at last!

Cedan l'antiche tue chiare vittorie

Leave to the past your old illustrious victories,
Haughty Rome, yet queen of all the world,
and the grand arches which time has not yet
weighted down with old memories.

New poems and new histories are being sung
of the noble burden of your fresh triumphs
And around those venerable locks are
New garlands celebrating your undying glory.

While kindly stories surround Vittoria,
In uncounted numbers about your chariot
Choirs sing of your splendid triumph.

Your eyes are weapons, and more than a chain
Are your tresses. O fortunate day
That I was able to come, to see, to be entranced, and to win.

Sex, Drugs, & Madrigals

Program Notes

The phrase “sex, drugs, and rock and roll” was coined to refer to what was seen as the corruption of youth culture in the 1960s and 70s. However, this hedonistic trinity has tempted the morally susceptible among us for centuries, and the twentieth-century catchphrase is really just a modernization of the long-acknowledged trio “wine, women, and song”. In its time, the Renaissance madrigal was the primary musical agent of depravity. A concerned Venetian citizen wrote in 1589: “Often the ears of youths are delighted by music which softens the heart to every lasciviousness, ruins good behavior, dispels honesty, inflames the soul with burning love, and stimulates the mind to carnal desire.” The power of music indeed!

Free from the stylistic restrictions of the Church and devised for the pleasure of highly educated singers, the Renaissance madrigal was a fertile breeding ground for innovations in the relationship of poetry and music. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, these innovations gradually coalesced under the umbrella of a new approach to composition, guided by the precept “*oratio sit domina harmoniae*,” – “the word is mistress of harmony.” This was in contrast to the established tradition in which the rules of counterpoint, harmony, and voice leading were of primary importance. The license to bend counterpoint to the will of emotion and meaning enticed composers, who found myriad ways to break musical rules in the name of expressivity. This program is an unabashed celebration of the resulting extremes of style, drama, and emotion in the late Italian madrigal.

As a point of reference and departure, we begin with a madrigal by Adriano Willaert, founding father of the Venetian madrigal school, and acknowledged master of the old style. His serenely melancholy *Giunto m' à amor* is a tapestry of artful counterpoint, and relatively conservative in light of what was to come. His successor Andrea Gabrieli wrote *Sopra la morte d'Adriano*, as one of many laments composed for the occasion of Willaert's death, but it is a particularly quirky tribute. The poem is an excessive expansion on a simple pun; the singers call upon the flora and fauna of the “Adriatic” Sea to mourn the passing of “Adriano” in unromantic detail, including multiple seaweeds, assorted mollusks and fish, and a highly localized list of Adriatic tributaries. Gabrieli's perfunctory setting of the final couplet “who in all the world is left to equal him in harmony?” makes one wonder what he really thought of the old style and the master's music.

Our concerned Venetian citizen was not the first to publically beat his breast over the corruptive qualities of passionate Italian madrigals. Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina famously renounced the genre in the dedication of his collection of Song of Songs settings to Pope Gregory XIII. Though he had published a book of Italian madrigals as a young man, Palestrina now “blushed and grieved” for having promoted his genius through such an “immoral” medium. But the allure of the madrigal was irresistible: in an about-face, Palestrina published his second book of madrigals only two years later, including the sweetly suggestive *S'un sguardo un fa beato* with its timeless theme of “don’t kiss and tell.”

No madrigal program would be complete without Luca Marenzio, one of the most prolific madrigalists of the late sixteenth century. Marenzio rarely missed an opportunity to translate poetic imagery into musical form, and his madrigals display accordingly breathless texture changes. The counterpoint in *Zefiro torna* clearly serves the storytelling: sparrows chatter in conversational duets, echoes laugh in cascades of sixteenth notes, flowers bloom in flourishes of dotted rhythms, and Petrarch’s wild beasts cry out their savagery through unorthodox suspensions. In contrast, Marenzio’s *Cedan l’antiche tue chiare vittorie* is a relatively chaste (if alluring) love song to the continuing military glory of Rome, rife with fanfares and noble phrases. Although you can’t appreciate it by ear, this madrigal contains a famous example of *augenmusik*, the practice of making the music notation look like the lyric at hand. In this case, the grand arches of Rome are sketched out by a rising and falling arch of eighth notes, designed with the page in mind rather than the sound. (Of note: a copy of the original 1584 soprano partbook is held in the Kislak Center collection.)

Claudio Monteverdi came under particular critique for his innovations in serving the text with musical expressivity. His fourth book of madrigals, published in 1603, serves as a masterful response to the criticism and today is seen as a symbolic turning point in the progression of Italian madrigal style. The complete book was staged by I Fagiolini in the polyphonic film *The Full Monteverdi*, which is well worth an hour of your time. *Io mi son giovinetta* and *Sfoga con le stelle* illustrate the power of text-derived polyphony from opposite ends of the emotional spectrum. The first is a feverish outburst of impetuous love carried by a few simple and largely architectural devices: upper and lower voice trios (he and she) in dialogue, fleeing sixteenth notes on “fuggi,” and sheer speed (it is, after all, *young* love). *Sfoga con le stelle*, on the other hand, achieves its expressive power through variety and contrast. Like a miniature opera, unmeasured ensemble recitative urgently propels narrative text, while expansive polyphony allows the poet’s thoughts and feelings to bloom. The poignant plea to the stars, “pietosa, sì,” is a study in the sublimity of a few carefully denied expectations: here Monteverdi creates longing through an unorthodox use of melodic dissonance in the soprano. A single additional

dissonance in the top soprano (appearing only in a 1616 reprint and often dismissed as a typo) lends extra pain to the final utterance.

Shortly after Monteverdi's fourth book appeared on the scene, a young Heinrich Schütz arrived in Venice to study with Giovanni Gabrieli (nephew of Andrea whom you heard earlier). Under Giovanni's tutelage, Schütz soon brought forth his debut publication: a book of Italian madrigals. These demonstrate both the influence of his aging teacher, who demanded mastery of traditional counterpoint, and the new and adventurous sounds Schütz was hearing in Venice at the time. Like Monteverdi, Schütz makes use of raw dissonance in *Dunque addio, care selve* to communicate the pain in the poetry, but with a heavier hand: on the words "fero ingiusto e crudo" (unjust and violent iron) resolution is denied almost to the limit of the singers' breath. Couched in an otherwise meticulous contrapuntal framework, the effect is a luxury of anguish.

Perhaps more than any other composer, the name of Carlo Gesualdo has become a buzzword in Renaissance vocal music. Although he was not alone in this, his use of chromatic harmonic shifts is stunningly disorienting to an ear accustomed to Renaissance music. Gesualdo's late compositions are among the most visceral illustrations of the notion that contrapuntal crudity could be justified for the sake of expression. From the opening passage of *Asciugate i begli occhi*, one feels as though one has gone down the rabbit hole to a place where the poet's agony demands complete subversion of harmonic progression.

And now for something completely different. Madrigal comedies were large collections of madrigals, often connected by plot and featuring the stock characters of the *commedia dell'arte*. In this context, "comedy" refers to the literary triumph of happiness over adversity, but there was also plenty of unapologetic silliness to be enjoyed by singer and listener alike. Adriano Banchieri's *Il festino nella sera di giovedì grasso avanti cena* (pre-prandial entertainment on the eve of Carnival Thursday) falls in the cracks between drama and parlous entertainment: it is not always clear whether the singers are characters, or simply themselves having a good time. In Banchieri's own words, this music was intended "for no other end than to pass the hours of leisure." The *Gioco del Conte*, in which the singers quite literally play a game to pass the time, gets the job done. The *Canzonetta da Bambini* from Giovanni Croce's *Triaca Musicale* is even more tongue-in-cheek, with all manner of tomfoolery and naughty references galore. Who knew the alphabet could be so enticing?

Spente eran nel mio cor l'antiche fiamme is the central piece in the remarkable second book of madrigals by Giovanni Valentini. This collection is equally interesting for its rich chromaticism and virtuosic vocal writing that stretches each voice to the limit of range and agility. Valentini served at the Graz court Kapellmeister to Archduke Ferdinand of Inner Austria, where he had access to

a “clavicymbalum universale” – an enharmonic harpsichord boasting 77 keys for its four-octave keyboard (a modern piano only has 44 keys for the same span!) which allowed for much further-ranging chromatic exploration within music involving the harpsichord. Composed on an epic scale in three parts, *Spente eran* unfolds in large, sweeping gestures, with moments of incredibly modern harmony; listen particularly for the beginning of part two “lingua non porria mai narrar” and part three “o fere stelle, omai datemi pace.” Alongside, *Spente eran* also offers passages of smooth, *stile antico* counterpoint that would have made Willaert proud.

Sigismondo d’India was a chameleon of late madrigal technique and expression. Scholars have compared his harmonic daring to Gesualdo, his use of texture to Marenzio, and his melody and treatment of dissonance to Monteverdi, but the character of his music is more than a collage of these other composers’ styles. Whilst listening to d’India, it is easy to experience a sense of historical suspension. When are we? To his *Dispietata pietate* from his third book, published in 1615, we give pride of place as the quintessential example of everything our concerned Venetian feared: impassioned outbursts, breathless suspensions, and scintillating harmonies just familiar enough to disarm the ear and render it susceptible to the new, dark, and outrageous.

In the words of musicologist Geoffrey Chew, Monteverdi’s music “sums up the late Renaissance...while at the same time summing up much of the early Baroque. And in one respect in particular, his achievement was enduring: the effective projection of human emotions in music.” The *Lamento della Ninfa* from Monteverdi’s eighth book is a madrigal in name, but it has more in common with an aria from one of Monteverdi’s operas, and stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from Willaert where we began. With the start of the lament’s repetitive four-note ground bass, we step fully into the world of early Baroque solo song and the complete realization of the new style: the nymph’s words and emotions have liberated themselves entirely from the restraints of traditional counterpoint. The result is the compelling transparency and expressive immediacy of popular music. The era and genre are irrelevant: we all recognize a torch singer with her back-up band.

We apologize if you were offended by tonight’s concert. The stuff youth is listening to these days—is it even music? We’ll tell you what it is. It’s trouble! To quote again our concerned citizen of Venice, “sometimes one is led away to dark places to shameful and outrageous actions.” Do be careful tonight, and if you do anything you later regret... blame the music.

-Bier, 2017

Les Canards Chantants

Les Canards Chantants is an American solo-voice ensemble performing renaissance polyphony, and known for their ‘elegant vocalism’ (Philadelphia Inquirer), ‘brilliant and moving programming’ (Early Music America) and ‘liveliness and theatricality’ (Boston Musical Intelligencer).

Founded in England while co-directors Robin and Graham Bier pursued their postgraduate graduate degrees early music, Les Canards Chantants made its debut in 2011 with a sold-out concert at the National Centre for Early Music in York, UK. The ensemble’s American debut at the 2015 Boston Early Music Festival Fringe, performing its now signature staged Italian madrigal program *Sex, Drugs & Madrigals*, was hailed as ‘some of the best Gesualdo and d’India you are likely to hear’ (Early Music America). Since then, the ‘Singing Ducks’ have established a home concert series in Philadelphia, USA, where they are Ensemble in Residence at Glencairn Museum, and have appeared in concert across the east coast, including collaborations with period instrument ensembles Piffaro and ACRONYM.

Les Canards Chantants has gained a reputation for daring presentation in concert, and for engaging with the most unusual repertoire from the Renaissance. They have appeared on BBC One Countryfile singing forbidden sixteenth century catholic polyphony, starred in a music video about the famous Eglantine Table at Hardwick Hall, received an Early Music America Outreach Grant for their immersive polychoral program and workshop *1.500 Surround Sound*, and are working with Brown University and the Chemical Heritage Foundation on a new digital edition and recording of seventeenth century German musical-alchemical emblem book *Atalanta Fugiens* by Michael Maier.

Les Canards Chantants have released two CDs to date, and are also becoming known for their quirky music videos on YouTube. Their first CD, *Two in the Bush*, a collaboration with lutenist Jacob Heringman and lute-viol duo Pellingman’s Saraband, is an intimate interpretation of the sacred vocal music of the Catholic underground in Reformation England, recorded by solo voices with lute and viol in a historic family chapel. Their second CD, released in November 2016, is the world premier recording of Giovanni Valentini’s intense and experimental *Secondo libro de madrigali*, recorded in collaboration with baroque string band ACRONYM.

Music *in the* Pavilion

The University of Pennsylvania's Music Department and the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts are proud to present a jointly sponsored music series for the 2016-2017 year. The series showcases an array of professional and international musicians, performing not only gems from standard concert repertoires, such as the piano works of Chopin, but also premiering works found only in the wealth of materials—print and manuscript—held in the Kislak Center's collection.

UPCOMING CONCERT SCHEDULE

Class of 1978 Orrery Pavilion, Van Pelt-Dietrich Library, sixth floor

Friday, April 7, 2017: **Matthew Bengtson**

6:15 PM discussion: led by Penn faculty and graduate students

7:00 PM concert: "A Music Salon in Nineteenth-Century Paris"

Series Directors:

Music Dept: Mauro Calcagno and Mary Channen Caldwell (faculty members)

Penn Libraries: William Noel (Director, Kislak Center and Director, Schoenberg Institute of Manuscript Studies) and Richard Griscom (Director of Collections & Liaison Services)

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