

# The Madrigal Transformed

IL QUARTO LIBRO  
DE MADRIGALI  
A CINQUE VOCI  
DI CLAUDIO MONTEVERDE  
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## Monteverdi String Band

*The madrigal around 1600*

The madrigal in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries has much in common with the string quartet in the time of Mozart and Beethoven: it is a form which combines fundamental simplicity with opportunities for great compositional skill and originality, and which consequently became extremely popular with composers, performers and listeners for many generations.

Every composer of note in this period produced numerous books of madrigals, setting short but poignant texts from some of the greatest poets of the day - Guarini, Tasso, Marino - and they circulated widely, being performed in a range of situations from the domestic (meal-time entertainments, diversion for the educated amateur) to the courtly and ceremonial (such as the famous Florentine Intermedii of 1589, one of the most expensive wedding celebrations in history, at which specially composed madrigals took centre stage).

So it is natural that the madrigal, as much as if not more than any other form, reflects in its changing styles and techniques the fundamental changes brewing in the theory and practice of music in the decades around 1600.

### Stringed instruments and vocal music

Before looking at some of these changes, I'd like to make a brief note on the practice of playing, rather than singing, these works. Of course, they were intended in the first place for voices; however, in an age where allocation of parts was a matter for the participants, we know that instrumentalists took great delight in playing madrigals. Italian madrigals were published, untexted, in England, where amateur viol consorts would eagerly devour them, for example. The form and structure - 4 or 5 equal parts, a variety of imitative and rhetorical techniques, and a fluent, vocal melodic style - are perfect for families of stringed or wind instruments to enjoy and exploit their own particular techniques. In particular, the use of the bow to imitate the voice, not just in the rather simplistic modern sense of playing "cantabile", but rather in the way the bow can be used to create dynamic shapes (such as the "messa di voce" or "esclamazione"), articulation and phrasing which parallel the rhythms and modulations of eloquent speech, lends a particular suitability to those instruments. Francesco Rognoni, in his "Selva di varii passaggi" of 1620, writes of the importance of the correct use of the bow, and describes the "soave archata" required for the violin family to sound at its best: this is what we enjoy most when we play this repertoire.

### Transformations: the Seconda Pratica, and the art of diminution

The intellectual milieu of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was one of great fervour: the humanist discoveries of the last century or so, with fresh translations of many of the Classical texts which formed the basis of mediaeval education, were bearing fruit, sometimes in revolutionary ways. Voyages of discovery and new ways of looking at the world meant that much that had seemed certain was no longer so: fundamental topics, such as the place of Earth in the universe and the language of the Bible, were the source of debate, persecution and even war. It is no surprise then that the small matter of music took on some of this turmoil. The study of ancient Greek texts on music led to a reconsideration of what music was actually *for*, and it was in this aesthetic environment that writers like Vincenzo Galilei (father of the famously persecuted astronomer, Galileo) espoused the increasingly common view that the words should be served by the music - "prima la parola" - and that composers should use whatever means at their disposal to ensure this.

Homophonic writing, where voices enunciate the words in rhythmic unison, or monody, where a single voice is accompanied by a sensitive

chordal accompaniment, started to take precedence over pure contrapuntal writing. The more sophisticated composers, amongst whom Monteverdi is the best-known today, found opportunities here to expand their techniques: the strict rules of counterpoint, so essential to perfect polyphony, could be stretched or broken. Unprepared dissonance, shocking or unexpected intervals, unresolved suspensions, silence: all these could be used to represent words and (more importantly) their emotional content or “affect”, which was to become a key concept throughout the next two centuries. This is so much more than simply “word-painting”, where “volare” could inspire a flurry of semiquavers, or “profondo” a leap to a low note: rather we have unprepared 7ths suggesting cruelty, a shocking key-change accompanying a messenger of death, or low voices on a repeated note representing the soul in its final hours.

So some of the pieces presented here are transformed in this way, by the use of the *Seconda Pratica*; in other cases we take older, *Prima Pratica* works and show how virtuoso performers of the day treated them, transforming them with diminutions: the most fundamental form of ornamentation in which long notes are “diminished” into shorter ones. This practice is likely to be as old as music itself, but in the 16<sup>th</sup> century tradition we see both its roots in the rules of counterpoint (stepwise motion, avoiding dissonance except in passing) and its flourishing under the influence of new thinking: more complex, expressive rhythms, stretching the rules of counterpoint and finally, in the work of the later generation of F Rognoni, delighting in the idiomatic features of specific instruments in a way which foreshadows the great violinists of the *Stylus Phantasticus* like Schmelzer and Biber. We also explore the art of ensemble diminution, both improvised and prepared, taking our cue from the words of Pietro della Valle: “Quei che cantano e sonano bene, in compagnia ...mostreranno l'arte loro in saper rifar bene e prontamente quel che un altro ha fatto innanzi; in dar poi luogo agli altri e opportuna occasione che rifaccian quello che essi hanno fatto”.

(“Those who sing and play well in company...show their art by copying well and promptly that which another has just done, and then giving way to the others, and timely opportunity for them to copy what they have done”)

We have set these “transformed” jewels amongst others of a more traditional style - canzonas and dances - to create sets of works which run together; amongst these we will also present readings from some of the great minds of the day.

*Dramatis Personae, in order of appearance*

**Claudio Merulo**, 1533-1604: organist and composer, based in Venice for most of his career.

**Claudio Monteverdi**, 1567-1643: string player and composer, born in Cremona, he spent formative years in Mantua and crowned his career in Venice. Arguably the greatest exponent of the *Seconda Pratica*, his *Orfeo* perhaps represents the perfect synthesis of modern and traditional techniques.

**Orlando di Lasso**, c. 1532-1594: Flemish singer and composer, spent many years at the Bavarian court in Munich where a famous painting of the 1560s shows his musicians, including a 6 part string band.

**Girolamo dalla Casa**, d.1601: virtuoso cornettist who settled in Venice and led the instrumental ensemble at San Marco; his treatise on ornamentation is one of the richest sources for late 16<sup>th</sup> century virtuosity.

**Giovanni Artusi**, c.1540-1613: musical theorist best known for his scathing attack on the *Seconda Pratica* as represented by Monteverdi's 4th book of Madrigals.

**Giovanni Bassano**, c.1561-1617: like dalla Casa, a virtuoso Venetian cornettist who left an inspiring ornamentation manual.

**Ricardo Rognoni**, c.1550 – c.1620: Milanese string player whose treatise of 1592 contains some of the earliest detailed advice on string playing as well as some of the most beautiful diminutions on madrigals

**Galileo Galilei**, 1564-1642: philosopher, playwright, literary critic and scientist who championed the application of mathematics to the real world, invented the telescope, and insisted to his great cost that the earth revolved around the sun.

**Gioseffo Guami**, 1542-1611: Lucchese violinist, organist and composer who served under Lasso in Bavaria before ending his career in Venice.

**Cipriano de Rore**, c.1515-1565: Flemish composer whose madrigals served both as compositional models and inspiration for virtuosity for generations after his death.

**Emanuele Tesauro**, 1592-1675: Torinese poet, dramatist and rhetorician, whose publications include some of the richest sources of information on the use of vocabulary and metaphor in Italian.

**Emilio de' Cavalieri**, c.1510-1620: Roman aristocrat, composer, and choreographer, associated with the Florentine Camerata, and one of the first to bring the new "*stile rappresentativo*" to fruition, and whose *Aria del Gran Duca* for the 1589 *Intermedii* became one of the first global hits.

**Giovanni Gabrieli**, c.1555-1612: Venetian organist and composer whose instrumental works number amongst the finest of their time, and who was one of the first to specify stringed instruments in his scoring.

**Giovanni Gastoldi**, c.1554-1609: Mantuan composer whose Balletti were immensely popular, possibly as light relief from the intensity of the modern madrigal!

**Adriano Banchieri**, 1568-1634: Bolognese monk, organist and composer who developed the madrigal as a dramatic form but disliked monody and the seconda pratica.

**Francesco Rognoni**, d. after 1626: son of Riccardo, virtuoso violinist and composer, whose 1620 treatise broke from old traditions and established a modern school of string playing.

**Pietro della Valle**, 1586-1652: Roman nobleman, traveller, writer and composer, who left invaluable comments comparing modern music with that of previous generations in a treatise of 1640.

**Bartolomeo de Selma y Salaverde**, c.1595-after 1638: Spanish bassoonist and composer who worked in Innsbruck and left among other compositions and interesting example of ensemble diminution.

**Cesare Negri**, c.1535-c.1605: Milanese dancer and choreographer whose publications provide some of the most detailed insights into courtly dance in late 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy.

*Oliver Webber, May 2014*