

Luca Marenzio: Primo Libro di Madrigali, 1580. La Compagnia del Madrigale. Glossa, GCD 922802, 2013. Available on Glossa /ClassicsOnline (MP3) / Amazon.com



By *Joëlle Morton*, guest reviewer

Ask the average classical listener what they know about Italian madrigals and if you're lucky, the names of two seventeenth century composers, **Claudio Monteverdi** and **Carlo Gesualdo** will be pulled out of the hat. These guys were among the very last of many generations of composers who wrote in this distinct genre, and their works incorporate extreme chromaticism in the service of drama. However, **Luca Marenzio** was an exact contemporary of theirs, and though his name is much less well known to us today and his biography is not nearly as florid as Gesualdo's or Monteverdi's, he was extremely famous in his own time and his madrigals were widely transmitted, imitated and generally cited as pinnacles of the form. Spending 68 minutes to get to know Marenzio's music as presented on this excellent recording will be highly worth your time.

Before getting into details, let me start by giving a wee bit of background. The Italian madrigal was without question the most important secular genre of the sixteenth century and at its most fundamental level, can be described as "music in service of a text." (Indeed yes, opera lovers, you can already see where this headed...) The very first madrigals were penned in Florence and Rome in the 1520s and 30s and from the beginning, madrigal composers drew on the sonnets (sophisticated rhyming poetry) of the fourteenth century poet, **Petrarch**, and then later to living authors who imitated Petrarch's style. Many of the texts speak about love and the struggle to gain affection of the object of one's desire. Love is almost always openly professed and eternal fidelity promised, but generally the lover suffers tremendously because of an inability to consummate the affair: the person is of a different social status, already married, or simply love is not reciprocated. So these texts tend to have a melancholic nature, full of words like "anguish" and "pain" as the author rails about the vagaries of fortune, and when consummation proves ever elusive, then a readiness for death. There are all manner of clever puns and hidden names and words and meanings buried within the poetry, so you have to pay close attention (to the original Italian wording) in order to catch the jokes. However, many of these texts were not intended to be taken at their simplistic, melodramatic face value. They often served as double entendres describing sex (otherwise known as the "little death") where of course, one would logically "wish to die a thousand times." Track 5 "Tirsi morir volea" on this recording is one such example. The text is an erotic dialogue by **Battista Guarini** and was a favourite of late sixteenth and early seventeenth century composers. The poem begins: "Looking into the eyes of the one he adored, Tirsi wanted to die. She, who burned for him with equal ardour said: "Alas, my beloved, oh, do not die yet, for I wish to die with you." And so on... you get the idea. Sixteenth century society found these musical settings (presented in polite society, no less) to be extremely risqué and titillating.

During the sixteenth century as music, sophisticated conversation, and the appreciation of good poetry became important social attributes, the madrigal provided a perfect medium to exercise and display all of those skills. Madrigals were generally performed as a pastime in social gatherings at peoples' homes. The musical settings were usually for four or five voices, all meant to be sung with one on a part, and were through-composed without significant repetitions of any section of music. Composers followed the precise nuances of the text finding ways to illuminate individual words and images; we refer to this kind of writing as "word painting" or even "madrigalism." For example, when faced with a text about heaven, the music would soar upwards; if the text speaks of hell, the line plunges down. Mentions of pain and suffering brought dissonances, a garland could be depicted by notes that go down and then

back up making a circle, and a description of bird song or flight elicited long, florid melodic lines, etc. etc.



Aged just 26 years old, Luca Marenzio burst onto the Roman scene and achieved astonishing success with the 1580 publication of his *Primo libro di madrigali*, the contents of which were proclaimed as some of the most refined and elegant madrigals of the entire century. He went on to become almost ridiculously prolific; his first book was reprinted no less than 9 times and he published another 23 volumes of music in a mere 20 years before his untimely death in 1600. Several of his madrigals were translated and used as models when the English took up the madrigal genre in their own right. Never mind Monteverdi and Gesualdo, it is not an exaggeration that in the last decades leading up to 1600 Marenzio was the golden boy, or flavour *du jour*.

Marenzio's early works are both the ones on which he built his career, and the ones for which he is still best known. His **compositional style** is tricky to generalize since every technique is utilized in service of a particular word or phrase or poem. Perhaps we could say that he is identifiable by his brevity/conciseness, that he has a penchant for graphically depicting as many concrete details of the text as possible and that each literary conceit is illustrated by telling and vivid motives that instantly characterize a mood and meaning. Each of his pieces is divided into small segments of text and word painting is carried to its height, with graphic illustration of individual words or phrases. This recording presents fourteen of the eighteen madrigals from his *Primo libro* and all but one are for five voices. Also included are two slightly later works by Marenzio, as well as the very first piece that is known by him; these are noticeably different to the ear than his pieces from *Primo libro*. The rest of the recording is filled out with a *sestina* (6-stanza poem) with each stanza set by different composers who were Marenzio's colleagues and contemporaries (**Giovanni Maria Nanino, Giovanni Battist Moscaglia, Giovanni de Macque, Francesco Soriano, Annibale Zoilo**). By the end of the disc, the listener is not only familiar with a broad sampling of Marenzio's finest work, but also has a sense of context for it. I don't want to give too elaborate a description of pieces – that would be like giving away

all the punch lines. But because they spoke strongly to me, let me single out a couple of my more favourite tracks to give you a bit of an idea what to expect.

“Dolorosi martir, fieri tormenti” (“Bitter agonies, fierce torments”) is one of the most stunning settings and can be said to use extravagant pictorialism in the service of extraordinarily subtle and refined poetry. Marenzio uses the **Phrygian mode, which has a built-in tension since the second degree of its scale is only a half step higher than the first.** This interval, called a ‘minor second,’ is very poignant in and of itself and can be used to great affect and effect to create dissonance. The text opens by describing ‘agonies and torments, as well as harsh traps, cruel snares and rasping chains’ and these things provide ample opportunity for visual illustration in musical terms. The first theme (repeated by all five voices in turn) is jarring because it presents the phrygian modality but then immediately departs to a pitch that is outside the mode. We are ‘tormented’ through these opening lines with music that is greatly drawn out and gives no sense of arriving in the place/tonality that the ear expects. ‘Chains’ are depicted through an inordinately long string of suspensions (dissonances created by one line moving and another staying still). ‘Sad voices, complaints, howlings and wailings’ are graphically brought to life in a variety of ways, with the lamenting figure being gentle and sung together as a group, and then the top line leaping to a very high note to complain and howl and wail. In an example of a visual pun intended to be appreciated solely by those reading/singing the music, the word ‘night’ is set using blacked notes. And if you thought the chains in the beginning were long, the words ‘never-ending misery’ are even more drawn out and dissonant before the pace picks up in depiction of the “bitter tasting nourishment” that closes the work. It’s a little gem of a piece and one in which new details will come to light on each listening.

[Soundcloud embed file]

Track #6:

Dolorosi martir, fieri tormenti

*Duri ceppi, empì lacci, aspre catene,
Ov'io la notte, i giorni, ore e momenti,
Misero piango il mio perduto bene
Triste voci, querele, urlì e lamenti,
Lagrime spesse e sempiterno pene
Son il mio cibo e la quite cara
Della mia vita oltr'ogni assenzio amara.*

Bitter agonies, fierce torments,

harsh traps, cruel snares, rasping chains,
through night and day, at all hours and every moment
I lament my lost love wretchedly
Sad voices, complaints, howlings and wailings,
tears frequently-shed and never-ending misery
nourish me, and the serene tranquility
of my life is bitter tasting.

The “Dialogo a otto in riposta d’eco” (“Dialogue for 8 voices with response in echo”) is a little different, but equally noteworthy. In this case, we begin with a text attributed to the renowned poet **Torquato Tasso**. The poem itself is genius. Our narrator goes into the woods where he/she wonders aloud what has become of the object of his/her affection. Each time our narrator pauses, the woods ‘reply’ with an echo of the last syllable that was spoken. Oh so cleverly chosen, that last syllable of text has a different meaning from when it was attached to its original word. As a result, our narrator gets a less than favourable ‘response’ to his lamenting, and by the end he/she is in a worse state than at the beginning (dumb ass – that’s what happens when you go off to the woods and talk to yourself...) So, Marenzio set this text using an ensemble of two separate ‘choirs,’ each with four voices and one sings the parts of the narrator while the others respond as the echo. And of course, the more the narrator speaks and the more heated he/she becomes, the greater the response and build up of replies from the echo. The piece is all of four and a half minutes long, but Marenzio’s treatment is almost like a symphonic structure in service of the text. I challenge you not to laugh out loud as you listen to this.

[Soundcloud embed file]

Track 14:

Dialogo a otto in riposta d’eco:

O tu che fra le selve occulta vivi,

Dialogue à 8, with response in echo:

O you, who dwell hidden in the forest,

Ch'è della vita mia, ch'è del mio Amore?

Love?

More

Dunque, Ninfa gentil, se lei si more,

Non vedrò le sue luci a fé giammai?

Mai

Che farò dunque in sì noiosa vita?

Chi mi consolerà nel stato mio?

Io

E tu, come ti chiami, miserella,

che consolarmi voi in questo speco?

Eco

Eco gentil che ne gl'ultimi accenti

Mi risponde, non son d'amante esempio?

Empio

E perché mi risponde ch'io son emio?

Non ho avuto pieta di suoi lamenti?

Menti

Mentir non posso che'l ciel e le stelle

Ponno far fede s'io gl'ho dato guai!

Hai

Or sia come si voglia, a Dio, ti lasso,

Spirto c'hai voce e fra gli boschi vivi,

Or quanto ho detto fra gli tronchi scrivi.

what has become of my life, what has become of my

Death

So, sweet nymph, if she dies,

will I never gaze on her eyes again?

Ever

What to do then, in a life so full of troubles?

Who will comfort me in this state?

Me

And you, what is your name, poor little one,

who is wishing to console me amongst these ruins?

Echo

Sweet Echo, who to those last words

replies to me, "am I not the embodiment of a lover?"

Wicked!

And why reply to me by saying that I am undeserving?

Did I not feel compassion when she was bemoaning her fate?

You lie!

I cannot lie, the heavens and stars can bear witness

to the fact I have never caused her any harm!

But you have!

Whatever it is, farewell, I leave you,

spirit which has a voice and dwells in the woods,

now that I have spoken amongst these trees, it is

written.

La Compagnia del Madrigale bills itself as a recently founded group, and the group would seem to be comprised of talented young Italian singers who are individually active all over Europe. As an ensemble they are terrific, and achieve an impressive result interpreting these works. The fact that they are so sensitive to the subtleties of the language is one of the biggest assets of this recording. Successfully presenting this music for an 'external audience' requires an intimate understanding and exaggerating of the text. So that also means that a listener's experience will be greatly enhanced by burying one's nose in the liner booklet and following not just the storyline in translation, but each word and image and gesture of the original poetry. (**Be forewarned: digital downloads do not come with texts and translations! This is a situation where 'old school' is not just better, but genuinely the only option, if you ask me.**) Anyone who enjoys the subtleties and cleverness that language can offer will greatly enjoy this recording, and this kind of music.

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