

SCHERZI MUSICALI

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2019

ZILKHA HALL AT THE HOBBY CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

PROGRAM NOTES

In 1600 a Bolognese music theorist picked a fight with one of the leading composers of the day, who eventually took the bait and replied in kind. In a publication called *The Imperfections of Modern Music*, Giovanni Maria Artusi cited “unbearably harsh” passages in three recent madrigals, chastising their (unnamed) creator for unprepared dissonances especially. The ensuing debate gave Claudio Monteverdi and his brother an ideal forum for promoting new ideas about how words might be set to music.

This defining moment for Baroque music was fundamentally an argument about authority. Artusi considered the venerable procedures of note-against-note counterpoint inviolable, while Monteverdi broke the rules when he had good reason to do so: “First the words, then the music,” as Giulio Cesare Monteverdi offered in defense of his brother’s striking compositions. Musical expression, in other words, could trump structural perfection. This new way of composing and valuing music had important consequences, not the least of which was the birth of opera during the same eventful decade.

Giulio Cesare Monteverdi’s justification of his brother’s art appeared in a preface to the volume that inspired this program: Claudio Monteverdi’s *Scherzi musicali* of 1607. Tellingly, these “musical jokes” for three voices, two violins, and continuo contain few (if any) passages that Artusi might have considered objectionable; instead, this modest volume of *canzonette* shows how well the Monteverdi brothers understood the modern musical marketplace, which embraced entertainment and creativity in equal measure. By contrast, Claudio Monteverdi’s many madrigals, published in nine separate volumes between 1585 and 1651, have greater ambition and range. In addition to several of the 1607 *Scherzi* (including one by Monteverdi’s brother), tonight’s program draws on works from the *Canzonette* (1584), the seventh book of madrigals (1619) and the second volume of *Scherzi musicali* (1632). The latter two collections are especially rich in masterpieces of expressive text setting: the piercing cries of “Ohimé, dov’è il mio ben” or the joyous frolic of “Zefiro torna,” for example.

Monteverdi had a voracious appetite for poetry of all kinds, from short epigrams to opera libretti. The Italian *canzonetta* is an example of light verse, with abundant charm but little pretension, thus the strong dance rhythms and uncomplicated strophic settings of the *Scherzi musicali*. The *madrigal* is a more elevated form of poetry, one that

“seems to have been invented just for music,” as one contemporaneous writer put it. The madrigal’s “brevity, wit, grace, nobility...and sweetness” made it immensely appealing to generations of composers from the 1520s through the 1640s—an impressive lifespan for any artistic genre. In Monteverdi it found its last great champion, one whose wit and dramatic sensibility transformed—and effectively exhausted—the genre.

This newfound “Baroque” spirit of innovation and experimentation likewise animates the instrumental works on tonight’s program. During the first half of the seventeenth century, the rhetorical flair of vocal monody found its instrumental counterpart in the *stile moderno* sonatas of Dario Castello and Marco Uccellini, among others. These rhapsodic works typically comprise multiple sections, which may or may not be clearly demarcated by changes in the musical texture. The point of this music is precisely its unpredictability, its seemingly irrational flamboyance, its strong sense of play. Michelangelo Rossi’s *Toccata Settima* is a somewhat extreme example of the analogous keyboard genre: in this case, a “touch piece” with stark, sudden contrasts of styles and extreme chromaticism.

Giovanni Battista Buonamente’s “Ballo del Grand Ducca,” finally, takes its inspiration from a “little dance of the Grand Duke,” a tune written by Emilio de Cavalieri for the 1589 Florentine wedding of Christine of Lorraine to the Grand Duke Ferdinand de Medici. The tune is really a harmonic pattern, a chaconne (or *ciaccona*) above which two treble instruments run riot. Fun, it seems, was not confined to just texted music during this lively and inventive age.

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