

PROGRAM NOTES

“Did women have a Renaissance?”, American historian Joan Kelly famously asked in 1977, answering that the era of optimistic self-discovery and classical learning largely bypassed women, whose legal rights and economic opportunities appeared, if anything, to deteriorate in the 15th and 16th centuries. Music, however, bucked the trend. Not only did the first female composers appear who speak to us with distinct artistic voices, women were also more visibly active as publishers, purchasers, and patrons of music. Italian princesses like Isabella d’Este led the trend by employing first-rate performers and commissioning new music. Women who acted as regents for underage rulers, or who were sovereigns in their own right, had even more opportunities to shape the cultural life of court and country. Whereas a married princess or queen consort only controlled her own household (which often included professional musicians or gifted noblewomen), normally the “official” court chapel for sacred and secular music came under the remit of their husbands. A female ruler, however, could command all the musical resources at her court, sacred and secular, public and private.

Margaret of Austria (1480-1530) was the first in a line of formidable Habsburg women who ruled the Duchy of Burgundy. The daughter of Emperor Maximilian I had received a first-rate education, so that a Burgundian chronicler praised her excellence “not only in the female arts of embroidery, but in vocal and instrumental music, in painting and French and Spanish rhetoric.” From 1507 until 1530 she acted as regent for her nephew Charles and used her independent status to turn Brussels and Mechelen into international meeting places of scholars and artists. She had inherited one of the grandest court chapels in Europe from her father and brother, which included renowned composers such as Pierre de la Rue (c. 1452-1518). His motet *Absalon fili* uses extreme musical means to project King David’s excessive sorrow for the death of his son: the overall scoring is for low male voices, and the use of flat key signatures and accidentals pushes the tonality at “non vivam ultra” (I won’t live any longer) towards D-flat Major, breaking the boundaries of the tonal system. The motet probably commemorates the untimely death of Margaret’s brother Philip in 1506, which also triggered a more personal response in the form of the three-part chanson *Se je souspire*. The Latin text in its lowest voice opens with the sigh “Again, a new pain” and invokes “rater mi Philippe” in the second part. The text—and possibly the music—was thus written by Margaret herself, and she had the chanson entered in a book of songs prepared specifically for her in the 1520s. The mournful tone of these pieces is not accidental: Margaret, rejected by her first fiancé on political grounds and widowed twice after short marriages, stylized her public and private image as an unfortunate woman, deepening the already dark hue of Burgundian court culture.

When Mary Tudor, the eldest daughter of King Henry VIII, took over the governance of England and Ireland in 1553, she not only had to combat the usual reservations against a female ruler, but also to manage a complete reversal of the religious politics of her father and brother. She declared Catholicism the only legal form of worship and reintroduced the rites and services abolished by the Protestant King Edward VI. This meant that the Chapel Royal had to rebuild its repertory of liturgical music, and John Sheppard (c. 1515-1558), who had joined Mary’s chapel in 1553, set himself to the task. His motet *Gaude, gaude, gaude Maria* is a respond for the feast of the Purification of Mary, popularly known as Candlemas, but beyond its liturgical function the grandiose proportions of the piece can be heard as a compliment to the namesake of the Virgin, Queen Mary. The tenor part sings the traditional plainchant in equal note values, while the other five voices weave a dense web of polyphony around it. The Pentecost respond *Loquebantur variis linguis* by Sheppard’s senior colleague Thomas Tallis (c. 1505-1585) similarly scaffolds the leap and bounds of the voice parts, particularly the frequently crossing trebles around the plainchant, resulting in a joyful babble not unlike the apostles speaking in tongues. Both in their use of Sarum Rite melodies and the dense textures, these motets look back to the early Tudor era as in the sound world of the *Eton choirbook*.

When Mary’s younger half-sister Elizabeth ascended to the throne in 1558, her return to Protestantism ushered in a more austere era for church music. At least the Royal Injunctions of 1559 allowed in morning and evening services “a hymn or suchlike song to the praise of God to be sung, in the best sort of melody and music that may be conveniently devised, having respect that the sentence of the hymn may be understood and perceived.” William Byrd’s (c. 1540-1623) anthem *O Lord, make thy servant Elizabeth* demonstrates this more text-conscious approach in the perorations opening each of the two parts. He probably wrote this piece while serving as organist at Lincoln Cathedral, one of the few religious establishments in the country that still maintained a good-sized choir, which allowed Byrd to score this anthem for six voices. In 1572 Byrd joined the Chapel Royal and became

the leading composer of Elizabeth's reign, despite his increasingly outspoken deviation from state religion. John Taverner (c. 1490-1545), in contrast, belongs to an earlier generation, but his motet *Christe Jesu, pastor bone*—originally praising St William of York—was in the 1580s adapted to include a plea to “save Elizabeth, Queen of England, and watch over the Church.” Elizabeth's court, however, was led by a musically gifted Queen and became famous not only for its church music but also for secular singing, dancing and playing, which made the Spanish Ambassador remark in 1576, “In all my travel of France, Italy and Spain, I never heard the like of a concert of music, so excellent and sweet as cannot be expressed.” The dedication of a collection of madrigals, entitled *The Triumphes of Oriana* (1601), must have seemed as a particularly apposite gift to the editor Thomas Morley. The pieces were written by twenty-three composers and show considerable stylistic variety—like the examples by the otherwise little known John Bennet (fl. 1599-1614) and Robert Carlton (c. 1558-c. 1638)—but all are set in a pastoral idyll populated by amorous shepherds and nymphs, and they end in the joyful exclamation: “long live fair Oriana!”

Little touches of word painting such as Bennet's “hovering” birds or Carlton's dancing nymphs and satyrs are often called “madrigalisms” and would not have been out of place in their Italian models. It was with a collection of madrigals, the *Primo libro de madrigali a quattro voci* that the first female composer made her debut in print in 1568. Maddalena Casulana (fl. 1566-1583) was a skilled lutenist and singer; her dedication to Isabella de' Medici Orsini (herself a noted patron and musical amateur) confidently wants “to show to the world the foolish error of men who so greatly believe themselves to be the masters of high intellectual gifts that these gifts cannot, it seems to them, be equally common among women.” Her talents went by no means unrecognized, for in the same year she was invited to contribute music to the ducal wedding in Munich, and she performed for the learned societies springing up in many Italian cities. The sombre *O notte, o ciel, o mar* offers an effective contrast between the invocation of the landscape in long note values and lively, dancelike cross rhythms. *Vagh' amorosi augelli* is more light-hearted and well suited to performance by a solo singer accompanying herself, not least because it is a song about singing.

If it is difficult to see whether or how Maddalena Casulana made a “career” in music, there is no doubt that musical training opened many doors in 16th-century Italy. Musical skills were indispensable for a young lady who aimed for a position at court, but they also helped girls to gain entry into prestigious convents, where the highlights of the daily liturgy were celebrated with polyphonic music. Leonora d'Este (1515-1575), the daughter of Duke Alfonso of Ferrara and Lucrezia Borgia, was sent to the Clarissan convent of Corpus Domini at age four, when she had lost her mother. Against the will of her father she decided to take the veil and later became the convent's abbess, retaining her active interest in music and music theory. Music historian Laurie Stras has convincingly identified Suor Leonora as the author of an anonymous motet collection printed in Venice in 1543. Not only are the five-part pieces scored consistently for high voices suitable for an all-female ensemble, several were also directly relevant to the Ferrarese convent: The text of *Sicut liliun inter spinas* belonged to a special Franciscan devotion to the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, whilst the joyful *Veni sponsa Christi* is suitable for a service admitting new members into the convent. Several motets of the collection reference the Eucharist, as would be fitting for a religious house named Corpus Domini, and *O salutaris hostia* additionally uses a chant melody from an office for St. Clare. All three compositions share a preference for floating, frequently crossing melodic lines whose slow-moving harmonies create an otherworldly effect.

The comparison of nuns' voices with angels was obvious to the many visitors who flocked to Italian nunneries in the late 16th and 17th centuries. The invisibility of the singers, performing from the walled-up inner church, added to their mysterious aura. But there was also civic pride in the musical prowess of the nuns, who usually came from local upper-class families, such as Raffaella Aleotti (1575-after 1646), the daughter of the Ferrarese court architect. She entered the Augustinian convent San Vito in 1589 and published a collection of motets for five, seven, eight and ten voices in 1593—the earliest publication by a nun—and the first pieces of sacred music credited publicly to a woman. In contrast to Suor Leonora, her motets are scored for mixed voices, possibly to reach a wider buying public, but the lower parts could easily have been performed by an organ or even viols, and sometimes the bass was transposed to the upper octave. The top voices are also singled out in imaginative ways, for example when the sopranos act as narrator for the angel's announcement in the Christmas motet *Angelus ad pastores ait*. Aleotti approaches the text with an ear for rhetorical flourish, for example when she switches to triple meter for the expression of great joy, “gaudium magnum,” or when she slows down the declamation for the

despondent “contristatus sum” in *Exaudi Deus orationem meam*. Aleotti herself was the dedicatee of two publications of sacred music, attesting to her recognition among her male colleagues.

Her contemporary Sulpitia Cesis (born in 1577) even helped to put her native Modena, a musical backwater until the turn of the century, on the musical map. She took her vows at the Augustinian convent of San Geminiano in 1593 and published a volume of *Motetti spirituale* in 1619. A Modenese chronicler recalls the musical excellence of the convent where the nuns were versed “in all sorts of musical instruments, having Sister Faustina Borghi, a young woman of 22 and a fine virtuoso in counterpoint, who plays cornett and organ, and Sister Sulpitia, daughter of the most illustrious Signor Count Cesis, who plays the lute excellently.” It was quite unusual for women to play wind instruments, but in a convent the invisibility of the performers and the strict prohibition of playing with male musicians created opportunities for developing these skills. Two motets from Cesis’s collection explicitly call for trombones, violones, arciviolone and cornett, possibly reflecting the choice of instruments at San Geminiano. In contrast, *Ascendo ad Patrem* and *Cantemus Domino* are scored for eight vocal parts divided into two choirs, which are contrasted effectively, sometimes bouncing short phrases or even individual words from one group to the other before breaking into festive, joyful triple meter for the final exultation.

—Barbara Eichner

Dialogo and Quodlibet composer’s note

Dialogo and Quodlibet is a parody piece based on the conversations found in the “Dialogo della Musica” of Antonfrancesco Doni of 1544. The “Dialogo” is a sizable volume containing a selection of contemporary pieces that Doni uses as a schema for analyzing music and commenting on its performance. With a light conversational tone an assemblage of characters rehearse the works and talk about them, supposedly in the manner of an Academia.

The composition *Dialogo and Quodlibet* is in twelve parts divided into two choruses, one of tenors and basses, and the other of altos and sopranos. The sopranos and altos represent the Muses of Helicon and the tenors and basses, characters from the “Dialogo” who are absorbed in their discussion of music theory and unaware of the Muses. The entire text of the piece is constructed from either quotes from the “Diagolo” or letters about music written by Antonfrancesco Doni, himself. The music references motives from 16th-century music, gradually disrupting them throughout the piece. The final section of the piece could be called a quasi Quodlibet, where chopped-up musical and textual quotes from earlier in the work are mashed together.

Sopranos and Altos (quote one of Doni’s letters referring to nuns’ singing)

You would certainly hear such harmony that it would seem to you either that you had been carried off to Helicon or that Helicon, together with all the chorus of the Muses singing and playing, had been transported here.

Tenors and Basses (Members of the Academia: quote from “Dialogo della Musica”)

You see that one can do with music whatever one wants; but I’ll show you that if a person decides against doing things the right way, can simply produce a hodgepodge. Here you have one piece with the soprano completely at odds with the other words below....

Sopranos and Altos (Maddalena Casaluna: from dedication of first book of madrigals)

I desire to show the world as much as possible in the profession of music....

Tenors and Basses (quote from “Dialogo della Musica”)

Here is another in which the words once belonged to a different piece and this piece had different words—and you see, the pieces go better than they did before. This bass is wrong, or you are singing it wrong; look—two rests are missing. And here—put six where there are four.

Of course, the fifth and the octave are perfect, the seventh and second imperfect; it is the forcefulness of a composer’s style that makes imperfect seem perfect, though if he were to have three or four successive fifths, it would make for an ugly composition.

Sopranos and Altos (continuing quote from Maddalena Casaluna)

....the vain error of men that they alone possess the intellectual gifts, and who appear to believe that the same gifts are not possible for women.

Tenors and Basses (quote from “Dialogo della Musica”)

This piece changes clefs more often than I can tell you. A pox upon these clefs and these fantastical brains that think them up! You should know that there are some who talk well about music but have bad musical inventiveness and worse practical skill others have good practical skill but no knowledge; others still little musical sense for all their practical accomplishments.

SATB together (quote from “Dialogo della Musica”)

Our wish here is to entertain each other, not to hold school

Sopranos and Altos

You would (certainly) hear such harmony that it would seem to you either that you had been carried off to Helicon. You would hear....

Tenors and Basses (repeat text from above “Dialogo della Musica”)

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