

CONCERT 22ND JUNE 2020 – THE MADRIGAL

I thought it may be of interest to have a small adventure into the music of the 15th and 16th century which until recent times has been sadly overlooked and mainly forgotten. The understanding of the development of music towards the formation of the 19th century orchestra as we know it today is not only fascinating but vital in understanding so much more than just the technical playing of notes on the page. It is a pathway to the interpretation and formation of the style and influences on the composer one is playing.

So let's take a short journey through the 15th century and the history of the madrigal. One can argue that the madrigal, certainly the most important representation of that century's musical composition, was central to the ongoing development of Western Music. The political situation in Europe at the beginning of the century was unstable, to say the least. The Netherlands was in uproar, Turkish forces were threatening Eastern Europe and Venice, Spain and England were in a massive battle for supremacy, especially of the seas.

The madrigal, which began to emerge in the 1520s, was an attempt to combine words and music in a new way by making musical shapes reflect the meaning of the poetry for which it was being set. The first madrigals were written mainly by Netherlanders who had come to Italy to escape the turmoil. They came, seeking their fortune, to the trouble free and highly educated courts centred in and around the Po valley. The musical language that developed grew out of the French "Chanson" but with the use of more sophisticated verse there developed a new kind of musical imagery to heighten its effect. With Petrarch, the finest of all Italian love poets, as their model, the use of unusual chords was employed to highlight particular key words; chromaticism was used as a device to create tension, and contrasts of fast and slow passages were used to underline events. A new music was born.

The second generation of composers using these methods flourished from the 1560s to the 70s. The shape of the music was now being influenced by the Italian language, which was more fluid than the French, while the inner meaning of the verse inspired them to explore the whole range of imagery and inherent feeling in the music.

By the third decade the madrigal, which up to now had become high thinking and serious, began to explore lighter and more playful moods but still maintained a certain dignity. This phase of the madrigal came to its climax in the 1580s with the work of the great Luca Marenzio. He usually chose verse with a great amount of imagery in it, perfect for tone painting, a technique replicated by composers like Schubert. His music has an incredible subtlety and intensity and became extraordinarily popular. His innovative and distinct style was imitated by composers as far afield as Germany and England. I always wonder what great madrigals would have been written to Shakespeare's poetry had it been in Italian! Look up Marenzio on YouTube. There are some fine examples of his works and also a much longer lecture/concert to really put you in the picture.

By the 1590s composers were reverting to more sophisticated verse with more intense and agonising reflections. Melody was becoming more edgy and eccentric, sometimes extremely dissonant, and many were wondering where the idiom could go next. The cry went up that "music was not as it was", a cry still heard today and on many occasions in the history of classical music. Back to the drawing board!

Recitative music came into existence.

Although used in opera and oratorio, recitative music achieved its greatest popularity in chamber music. The title of madrigal was retained, as the old ideas of musically painting the images to verse and expressing the underlying emotions were unchanged. However, it was now accompanied and was often performed with one singer only as the audiences complained that with many voices playing against each other, the words could not be understood.

The 'aria' was accompanied by harpsichord or lute and composers started to realise that a good tune that anybody could sing (especially their courtly benefactors) was money in the bank!
The serious madrigal was dead and, by 1630, was swamped by the popular song.

Enter Monteverdi.

As a boy in his teens he was no match for the likes of the Marenzios, and was living in what was regarded a provincial backwater called Cremona. His audience was unsophisticated, his singers amateurs. This all changed when at the age of 24 he won a job with the Duke of Mantua. Here he experienced up to date composers and, more importantly, highly skilled singers. He was in the thick of new trends. There is a period of about 10 years from which none of his work exists, no one knows why but when new works did finally appear they were quite startlingly new. His Third Book of Madrigals published before this period included some lovely pieces and was popular, but when Four and Five were published there was immediate critical uproar and great popularity. They contained powerful smouldering emotions of a man perhaps over-sensitive and quick to feel slight. His life was a roller coaster and the success of these madrigal books and his opera L'Orfeo was overshadowed by the death of his wife and one of his favourite Prima Donnas for which his training in Mantua was now famous.

The tragedies broke Monteverdi for many years. His sixth book of madrigals, published in 1614, was largely a collection of laments written in a passionate and heart-wringing style. These were written after he had a disastrous quarrel with the new Duke of Mantua who then dismissed him from the court. He was jobless for nearly a year, finally finding a post worthy of his brilliant talents. He moved to Venice and became head of music to the Doge and Republic. This job was to change the direction of his compositions towards church music. He was to turn away from chamber music and never followed its progress. He did, however, write two more books of madrigals, a musical form for which, amongst all his other magnificent music, he is so fondly remembered.

On YouTube look up Claudio Monteverdi "Vi ricorda o bosch'ombrosi" for a version with period instruments. Note the beautiful fresco on the lid of the harpsichord.

Jumping ahead away from the 15th/16th centuries to a work I love. You Tube Gustav Mahler 'Ruckert Lieder' a collection of 5 songs for voice and orchestra based on the poetry of Friedrich Ruckert, soprano Margaret Price. This is the journey the madrigal has led us to. Extraordinary!!