

FLAMING HEART

Listen!

Longe da te, cor mio

A grido, outcry of pain, flung out from the lover towards his far-off beloved, as if covering the great distances of their separation; then, in the same breath, cor mio, clasping her to the yearning centre of his being. The music, too, is thrown outwards across wide-spaced chords, wrenched upwards harmonically by force of grief, before sinking desolately back down within itself into deeper registers. Such concentrated intensity, such lacerating disparity of scale – and all in the space of a phrase! Small wonder Monteverdi was proud of the new-found powers of his music, powers to illumine the emotional heart of a text, to cut through to vivid, painful reality.

Listen:

Struggomi di dolore, di dolcezz' e d'amore

– how he melds together the sorrow, tenderness and love into a harmony of aching yet lovely diatonic dissonances; how he pushes on then arrests the music's flow, alert to every quickening or faltering of the poet's hopes. This is not music you can let wash over you; nor can you hope to hear everything in so concentrated a span. You could listen over and over to this shard of musical crystal, and each time a different facet of its complete emotional truth will glint – momentary, dazzling – at you. Well might Musica, in the Prologue to *L'Orfeo* (1607), boast that

*I am Music, who in sweet accents
can calm each troubled heart,
and now with noble anger, now with love,
can inflame the most frozen minds.*

Perhaps Monteverdi meant this as a personal boast, coming as it does at the very start of his first foray into the brand-new genre of opera: certainly, he was no stranger to provocation, nor to propagandising on behalf of the new style – the *seconda prattica* – with which he and his progressive colleagues sought to revivify the expressive power of music. Tonight's concert shows the extraordinary range and variety of this new art, as he developed it across his long career.

Longe da te was published in 1603 in Monteverdi's Fourth Book of Madrigals, a groundbreaking volume, assembled from a decade's worth of experimentation, that cemented his position at the forefront of the musical avant-garde. Above all, this avant-gardism centred on the search for a new expressive balance between words and music. Since the mid-sixteenth century, in the madrigals of Rore, Wert, Marenzio and others, attempts had been made to ally music more closely and directly to a portrayal of the emotional meaning and character of the text than was generally the case with the polyphonic idioms of the time, leading to far-reaching innovation in all aspects of style and genre. A crucial intellectual stimulus came from the Florentine humanist circles of the 1570s, where researches into Ancient Greek music had led some theorists, such as Girolamo Mei, to conclude that Classical tragedy had been sung throughout. Such a proposition led, via experiments in musical declamation and the first accompanied art-song, to the first operas (such as *L'Orfeo*), with their pure declamatory *stile recitativo*.

In the madrigal, Wert was experimenting with an almost expressionist style by the 1590s, abounding in dissonance, sudden interruptions and silences, metrical changes, chordal declamation, unusual textural effects and strangely twisted melodic lines. All this his young Mantuan colleague Monteverdi absorbed into his own mature style, a style which, though decidedly modernist, eschews gratuitous shock for a carefully balanced response to a text. All the pieces performed tonight illustrate the exquisite refinement of his art even when at its most violently emotional, a unique expressive clarity – doubtless wrought from his legendary fastidiousness – that sets him above even the greatest of his contemporaries.

Ardo, avvampo comes from the great late Eighth Book, *Madrigali Guerrieri ed Amorosi*, published in Venice in 1638. Its central conceit – 'my heart is ablaze! bring ladders! water! to the rescue!' – is indulged to the full, with Monteverdi unleashing a furious conflagration that is only finally quenched in the last phrase, as the glowing embers implore, 'let the heart burn to ashes, and fall silent.'

Just two years after the great fourth book, Monteverdi published his fifth book of madrigals which the academics have hailed as an even greater volume because of its use of an instrumental ensemble to accompany the voices. In fact the works are different rather than greater. 'E così poco a poco' expands a quasi-improvisatory duet texture to a full six-voice finale through the constant use of the last phrase of text: 'He who would quench an old flame makes it immortal', a technique used elsewhere in the book.

Monteverdi's first six books of madrigals were written at the Gonzaga court in Mantua. His move to Venice in 1614 to one of the greatest jobs in all Europe, the maestro di cappella of the basilica of St. Mark's, heralded a new concentration on sacred works. But he still found time in 1619 to publish his first collection of secular duets, trios and miscellaneous piece entitled 'Concerto'. 'Ohime dov'è il mio ben', as with the prologue to *L'Orfeo*, is a series of variations over a pre-existent bass-line, known as the Romanesca. But there the bass-line has been slowed down and altered to allow for strong expressive variety. 'Chìome d'oro' is another set of variations for two sopranos with a two violin theme that he later used in a psalm setting published in 1640 (*Beatus Vir*). The ballo 'Tirsi e Clori' dates from 1615, very early in Monteverdi's Venetian life but was in fact commissioned by the new duke of Mantua, Ferdinando. Beginning with a dialogue, it concludes with a variety of dance steps all beautifully caught in the music.

Batto qui pianse, from the Sixth Book (1614), inflames the images of Giambattista Marino's rather generic sonnet into a succession of striking contrasts of mood. The book also contains the astonishing five-voice *sestina*, *Incenerite spoglie*, written in 1610 at the request of Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga in memory of the young soprano Caterina Martinelli. The Mantuan court poet Scipione Agnelli provided a text in the form of a *sestina*, the most artificial of all poetic schemes, wherein the six lines of each verse must end with the same six words (though shuffled in order), the final tercet containing all six. Perhaps Agnelli chose it for its almost ritualistic repetition of images; certainly the six rhyming words – tomb, heaven, earth, breast, lament, Glauco – seem to circumscribe the work's grieving universe. Monteverdi's response is extraordinary: beginning in solemn declamation and shot through with exclamations of anguish, the work exudes a severe, marmoreal grandeur, Michelangelinesque in its humane sincerity in the face of death.

Hor che'l ciel begins where we left Glauco, in a natural world turned to limbo by grief. In this great Petrarch setting we see all the economy and stylisation of Monteverdi's later Venetian years: his effortless evocation of mood (which seems to owe as much to Titian as to his experience of opera), his ultra-vivid contrasts of *maniera* (which never ossify into mere manner). And finally, that virtuosity and depth of imagination that can conjure the limpid grace of a 'chiara fonte viva' and the yawning abyss of agony over which he leaves us suspended, and make them both so incredibly real.

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