

Pegasus Early Music

presents

The Secret Music

September 29, 2024

Incarnate Word Lutheran Church, Rochester, NY

*Laura Heimes, Clara Rottsolke, sopranos; Ashley Mulcahy, mezzo-soprano;
Christa Patton, harp; David Morris, gamba and lirone; Deborah Fox, lute and theorbo*

Belle ne fe natura Sinfonia O valoroso Dio	Luca Marenzio (1553-1599)
O dolcezz' amarissime d'Amore T'amo mia vita	Luzzasco Luzzaschi (1545-1607)
Canzon Prima Piangono al pianger mio Donna mentre vi miro	Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583-1643) Sigismondo D'India (1582-1629) Lodovico Agostini (1534-1590)
Se in questo scolorito languido volto Trios <i>from</i> La liberazione di Ruggiero	Giulio Caccini (1551-1618) F. Caccini (1587-1646)
Passacaglia del Seigneur Louigi Sonata di Basso Solo	Luigi Rossi (1597-1653) Gregorio Strozzi (1615-1687)
Le tre grazie Che si può fare	Barbara Strozzi (1619-1677)
Canzona detta La Pozza Come dolce hoggi l'auretta	Stefano Landi (1587-1639) Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643)
Acceso mio core Hor care canzonetta	Francesco Manelli (1595-1667) Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643)

The program will run about 75 minutes without intermission.

The Secret Music program notes

Let's imagine ourselves in Ferrara, Italy, in 1580. In the private chambers of the young Duchess Margherita Gonzaga, an exclusive concert is about to happen. The audience is a select group of courtiers, present by invitation only, and the doors are closed, leaving out the other members of the court. The composer and *maestro di cappella* (Director of Music) at the court, Luzzasco Luzzaschi, sits down at the harpsichord, and accompanies three female singers in solo, duo, and trio music that he has composed especially for them. The singers, Laura Peverara, Anna Guarini, and Livia D'Arco, also accompany themselves, on the harp, lute, and viola da gamba. This is the celebrated *musica secreta*, or secret music of the Duke Alfonso d'Este II. These women were called the *concerto delle donne*, or consort of women, or The Three Ladies, and they were about to become a sensation throughout Italy and beyond.

They were, however, not something completely new at court, because we know that the Duke was infatuated with music long before 1580 and sponsored an ensemble of noblewomen who sang as amateurs. But this particular new group represented a revolutionary change because they were at court as **professionals**. They had been accepted into court and given positions as ladies-in-waiting to the Duchess, but their primary responsibility and reason for being there was to perform; because they were excellent musicians, they had been gathered from different places and brought to Ferrara. As professionals, they had contracts and were receiving salaries. They were most likely the first women professional musicians at a court in Europe.

Ferrara had been a center of culture for several generations, and the d'Este family in all its branches had long been important patrons of the arts. Alfonso's court was one of the biggest musical establishments in Italy, with more than forty musicians on the payroll, some with enormous salaries and benefits. He employed many musicians whose names we know today such as Giaches de Wert, Luca Marenzio, Alessandro Piccinini; he also sponsored the poets Torquato Tasso, Battista Guarini, and others. The Duke was a cultured man who spoke French and Latin, understood Spanish, and presented himself with "gentlemanly and stylish behavior." His court was beautiful, and filled with nobility and interesting artistic visitors, the latter including Claudio Monteverdi, John Dowland, and Carlo Gesualdo.

Favorites of the Duke, the Ladies soon became very famous, as he selectively showed them off. He was passionate about, even obsessed with, the music that he was sponsoring at his court, but he also reaped other benefits. The *concerto* brought prestige to the court, and visitors came from all over Europe to hear them. Soon the secret was out, and imitation ensembles were being formed in other cities, at other courts; every noble household had to have a *concerto delle donne!* The Gonzaga in Mantua formed one in 1587; Maria de Medici formed one at her court in Rome; Francesco de Medici formed one in Florence; and a second *concerto* was even formed in Ferrara by Alfonso's sister Lucrezia. The *concertos delle donne* provided many composers with inspiration and work, and a whole new genre of music, the madrigal for women's voices, came into being.

As you'll hear in the opening Marenzio and Luzzaschi works, the musical style of the three ladies depends on two main characteristics: close but expansive range, and virtuosity. These traits continue through the rest of our program, as other composers embraced the special sound and requirements of writing for these voices. Some of the music requires ranges of more than two octaves, and the lines often cross each other in disregard for the traditional order of vocal ranges. Although ornaments (or diminutions) could be improvised in music from this period, they were just as often written out, and **Luzzaschi** does so with careful imitation in voice to voice. He published his pieces for one to three singers in 1601, many years after he composed them, as the original pieces were part of the *musica secreta*, and not for public consumption. Luzzaschi was the music director at the court in Ferrara, and developed this virtuosic highly ornamented style for the women singers, composing for their voices and rehearsing with them.

The **Marenzio** pieces are from the Second Intermedio of 1589, a set of grand theatrical and musical entertainments for the wedding celebrations of the Grand Duke Ferdinando I de Medici and Christine of Lorraine. Many musicians and composers contributed to this series of extravagant programs; these pieces are among the smallest and simplest, but give us a wonderful idea of the sound of the *concerto delle donne* in Florence.

Girolamo Frescobaldi was born in Ferrara, and before he left for Rome, he studied with Luzzaschi. **Lodovico Agostini** was also from Ferrara, and was associated with the court at the same time as Luzzaschi, also composing for the *concerto delle donne*. **Sigismondo d'India** worked in many

places around Italy, soaking up different musical styles; he spent time in Mantua, where he might have met Monteverdi, and also was employed for a short time at the d'Este court in Modena.

The **Caccini** family was from Florence. The father, **Giulio**, is famous today for his book called *The New Music*, in which he discusses vocal ornamentation and gives examples through many beautiful songs. We do know that he had visited the court at Ferrara and heard the singers there, saying

“Every evening the Duke called us into a small room, where we found the Duchess of Ferrara, the Duchess of Urbino, and three ladies -- or rather three angels of paradise, for they sing so miraculously that it seems to me impossible to do better.”

Giulio's wife, Lucia, was a singer, as well as their two daughters, Francesca and Settimia. They had a family *concerto delle donne* performing group, touring around Europe with Giulio. **Francesca**, known to the public as “La Cecchina”, made her first public appearance at age thirteen, singing at the royal wedding of Maria de Medici and Henri IV, King of France. The King was so impressed he invited her to stay at the French court, but that request was refused by her employer, the Florentine court, and she returned to Italy. Francesca composed the first opera by a woman, *La liberazione di Ruggiero dall'isola d'Alcina*, in 1625; it has the added distinction of being the first Italian opera to be performed outside of Italy, in Warsaw in 1682. The opera is full of choruses for three female voices, a *concerto delle donne*, reinforcing the connection between the virtuosic style of the Three Ladies court repertoire and the opera stage.

Barbara Strozzi (no relation to **Gregorio Strozzi**, who was an organist in the south of Italy) was the illegitimate adopted daughter of Giulio Strozzi, an important figure in the Venetian cultural scene, famous as a poet, opera librettist, and organizer of academies in both Rome and Venice. Known best in her time as a singer, she published eight volumes of vocal music between 1644 and 1664, in her own emotionally expressive style and characteristic turns of phrase. She established herself as one of the leading Venetian composers of her generation, and in fact published more music than any contemporary male composer in Venice. Although most of her music is for solo singer, there are quite a few pieces for multiple singers, including this trio of the Three Graces, which evokes the style and sound of the *concerto delle donne*.

Francesco Manelli was a singer, composer, and poet in Northern Italy. As an impresario in Venice, he was an important figure in establishing opera as a public commercial institution. He collaborated with Giulio Strozzi and Benedetto Ferrari to produce operas, often performing in them. Most of his music, including at least nine operas, has been lost, but this lovely *ciaccona* for three singers, *Acceso mio core*, suggests the textures of the Three Ladies repertoire.

Claudio Monteverdi, with his finger on every musical style of time (which you will certainly hear in our April Vespers of 1610), is represented on this program by works that clearly draw on the *concerto delle donne*. The first is a work from his youthful 1584 publication of *canzonette* for three voices – he was seventeen at the time of its publication! The text to the three-part piece that ends our program extolls the joy of song, and expresses our gratitude to you, our audience, for listening today, and for your pardon for any of our faults!

--- Deborah Fox