

Florilegium Chamber Choir

May 2011

Claudio Monteverdi (1567 – 1643) – Excerpts from the *Third Book of Madrigals*

Francesco Cavalli (1602 – 1676) – *Lament of Cassandra (from La Didone)*

Giacomo Carissimi (1605 – 1674) – *Ferma! lascia ch'io parli (Lamento di Maria Stuarda)*

A dozen orchestras across the country are now in a state of financial crisis; of those that are struggling with multimillion-dollar deficits, four have evaporated in the last six months—doors closed, assets sold, musicians dispersed. This is not a sign that the times they are a changin', it is a product of times that already changed. Artistic practices necessarily lag behind shifts in political and economic power; like the tsunami following the earthquake, the effects of the financial crisis of 2008 are just now rolling through the American arts world.

Curiously, the situation was not so different four hundred years ago in Italy. By 1592, the date of Monteverdi's *Third Book*, the influence of Papal Rome over Europe was in the process of a long wane, a culmination of events including the Italian Wars of 1494-1559 (feudal skirmishes between city-states, which served as the factual basis of the rift between Shakespeare's Montagues and Capulets), Martin Luther's famous indictment of 1517, and the schism of the Church of England in 1534. With the waning of Papal power came a shift in priority from Church-sponsored liturgical music to court-sponsored secular music.

The oldest son of a doctor, Claudio Monteverdi was well educated as a child, attended the University of Cremona, and held his first position as *Maestro di Capella* at the Cathedral of Cremona before moving on to become a vocalist, viol player and conductor in the court of Vincenzo I of Gonzaga in Mantua (all by his early 20's). Later he would take over music at St. Mark's in Venice.

Monteverdi perfectly straddles the transition from the Renaissance era to the Baroque era (although I would wager that he thought of himself as nothing but highly modern). Political, economic and technological changes in the external call for shifts in artistic priorities; new ideas find expression in newly relevant forms. Monteverdi's early books of madrigals (including today's pieces) are well rooted in Renaissance style, but we can hear in this writing a number of musical elements that would come to be featured prominently in his subsequent eighteen operas and would veritably define Baroque practice.

One of the most fascinating twists in the story is that the key musical elements we understand as hallmarks of the *Baroque*, among them recitative, the solo aria accompanied by a basso continuo, the descending chromatic line and a new attention to harmonic progression over intertwining melodic lines, the resultant doctrine of the "affect," came about as a result of composers striving ever more fervently towards one of the primary objectives of the *Renaissance*. Simply, composers in the late 1500's wanted to make music *more like* what they imagined the music of classical Greece to be. In this striving we see (and hear) the first young buds that would ultimately flower into the Enlightenment a century later; no longer was the aim to glorify an invisible God, but to come to understand and depict the realism of the human condition.

Over the preceding century, the Catholic ideal for music, as exemplified in the polyphonic choral style of Palestrina, had cultivated an obsession with ever-richer polyphonic works, reaching an apotheosis in the mid 1500s with works like Alessandro Striggio's forty-voice mass and Thomas Tallis's forty-voice motet.

While this music served to glorify ideas of eternal and omnipotent power, such density of overlapping voices could at times lack in direct personal expression, and could not, by any stretch, be discussed in terms of the newly vogue concept of “realism.”

And of course, nothing could speak to the realism of the human condition better than the infinite vagaries of...*love*...true love, proud love, fated love, unrequited love, Greek love, gentle love, tortured love, tragic love, fading love, lovers in turmoil, love lost, to say nothing of more generalized longing, yearning, pleading, battling, succumbing, thrashing and triumphing. (As a point of reference, *Romeo and Juliet* was written sometime between 1591 and 1595, exactly contemporary with Monteverdi's *Third Book*; the new obsession with love was as universal anything could be in the late 1500's.) And so it was a very small step from standing around and singing about love to putting the singers on a stage, dressing them up and dramatizing the whole affair.

Despite the generation gap, Monteverdi, Carissimi and Cavalli were all closely linked. Cavalli (who's real name was Pietro Francesco Caletti-Bruni; Cavalli was his patron's name) used as a librettist for *La Didone*, Giovanni Francesco Busenello, who also frequently wrote for Monteverdi. And when Monteverdi left St Mark's, it was Carissimi who received the initial offer to replace him. Carissimi turned Venice down, choosing to remain closer to Rome. Both composers were able to draw on the initial thrust of enthusiasm for Monteverdi's new art form just as it was coming into full bloom, and both composers were major contributors to early opera. Cavalli alone wrote forty-one operas, of which twenty-seven survive.

La Didone tells the legend of Dido and Aeneas. Composed some 40 years before Purcell's significantly more famous account, it takes a much broader perspective on the events following the fall of Troy. In this aria, Cassandra, one of King Priam's daughters, laments the death of her fiancée Corebo, who died, predictably, battling to defend Cassandra's honor, before they had a chance to consummate their love. Given the text, I wonder if Cassandra is more sorry for Corebo's death or for having been left, woefully pure, behind.

Carissimi called *The Lament of Mary Stuart* a *cantata* (a song), but I think of it more as a *monodrama*, similar in scope and aim to the suite of pieces recently presented by New York City Opera under the same heading. The piece has a complete narrative, which unfolds in “real time” and is presented by one singer/actor with accompaniment. Pieces like this were apparently in vogue in the mid-1600s, but I can think of few other examples that are well known today. In this lament, Mary, Queen of Scots, issues her last words prior to being executed in 1587 (also contemporary with Monteverdi's madrigals). Carissimi's use of text repetition (the line “*à morire*” – “to death”) has its origins in Monteverdi's polyphonic choral style, but is here put to an even more refined expressive use. Mary Stuart's is one of the first “mad arias” on the books.

Few composers in history embodied both ending and beginning as much as Claudio Monteverdi. As I survey the current musical landscape and ponder the flexibility of Monteverdi's genius, I have great hope for the current generation of creative minds as we search for that which is newly relevant in our changed world.