

Miller Theatre Program Notes

Early Music: Songs of Love, Lust, and Lamentation

Saturday, February 14, 8:00PM

The Song of Songs

Embracing history and prophecy, proverb and canticle, the Bible also includes one of the most superb erotic poems in all literature: the Song of Songs. Since this short book (116 verses) contains virtually no explicit religious reference, it has had to be interpreted as allegory for its place in scripture to be justified. Jewish traditions represent it as an image of God's love for the people of Israel; Christian theologians have understood it as foreshadowing Christ's love for the church or as honoring the Virgin Mary. Any of these explications may seem a stretch in the light of such verses as: "Thy two breasts are like two fawns that are twins of a gazelle, which feed among the lilies." Nevertheless, verses from the book were incorporated into Christian liturgies from very early times, especially for feasts of the Virgin, and have thereby been set by many composers.

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina's approach was a little different. In his late 50s, he set not just the liturgically authorized portions but half the entire book, creating a sequence of 29 motets, which he published with a dedication to the pope, Gregory XIII, as a demonstration that the Bible is just as hot as any madrigal text. Our first piece comes from this collection. The text is in dialogue, worked in closely imitative polyphony. A full close marks the end of the first verse, and the second opens in block chords ("Qualis est"), soon transferring back to counterpoint. Appearing in a volume presumably intended for private delectation and devotion rather than communal worship, the piece sensuously marks certain of the words.

So, in a different way, does the setting by John Forest, from around 170 years earlier, of some of the same verbal material. Flowing and intricate rhythms are typical of the period, but the harmonic shift at "rubicundus" was perhaps meant to surprise. Forest may have been a distinguished churchman, and his three-part piece would have been sung in church to hail the Virgin Mary. It was copied into a luxury volume, the Old Hall Manuscript (so called because it belonged for many years to a Catholic college at Old Hall Green, about 30 miles north of London), which also includes music by John Dunstable and other contemporaries of Forest's.

This triptych of Latin settings ends with a splendid seven-part piece by one of Palestrina's great Netherlandish predecessors, Jacob Clement, jokingly known as "Clemens non Papa" (Clement-not-the-Pope) in distinction from a contemporary pontiff. Most of his magnificent *Ego flos campi* (again a text set aside liturgically for Mary) is in superbly flowing polyphony, with a short break for interchanges between choral groups at "Sicut lilium inter spinas."

From this expression of the Catholic church triumphant we move to post-Reformation England, and to the poet-cum-satirist George Wither's efforts at recasting the Song of Songs, which was one of many biblical sources he plundered to make *The Hymns and Songs of the Church* (1622). In the Song of Songs, Wither observed, "God doth most movingly impart unto us the ravishing contentments of the divine love, by comparing it to that delight which is conceived in the strongest, the commonest, the most pleasing, and the most commendable of our affections." Whether these ravishing contentments are conveyed by some of his versifications is a moot point, but he was lucky in having as his musical collaborator the greatest English composer of the period, Orlando Gibbons. This partner, Wither noted in his dedication to James I, "hath chosen to make his music agreeable to the matter, and what the common apprehension can best admit, rather than to the curious fancies of the time."

Lamentations

Having made his Miller debut last season, Thomas Crecquillon is emerging as one of the outstanding composers of the first half of the 16th century—or, rather, re-emerging, for he was well recognized in his time by prestigious appointments (working for the Habsburg emperor Charles V in his native Low Countries) and publications. His music has a smoothness that has been seen as anticipating

Palestrina—a comparison we may now judge. He wrote two settings of texts from the Lamentations of Jeremiah, a Biblical book resembling the Song of Songs only in brevity and liturgical usefulness, having been appropriated for the evening services of tenebrae in Holy Week.

A composer who concentrated on vocal genres, Peter Cornelius had the gift of staying on friendly terms with all the warring musical giants in the Austro-German world of his time: Liszt, Brahms, and Wagner. He wrote this remarkable trans-denominational motet soon after the death, in December 1863, of the poem's author, Friedrich Hebbel, a writer of particular importance to Schumann. Not Schumann, though, but Liszt and Wagner are suggested by the richness and the electric shifts of the six-part harmony—and perhaps still more so Bruckner, whose music Cornelius can hardly have known at this period, though whose kindly temperament he shared. Cornelius revised the piece in 1872, but it was not published until 1905.

The Ribald Chanson

Carnal pleasure can be a metaphor for spiritual grace, or it can be, well, just carnal pleasure. As we have found in the case of the internet, it runs like wildfire through a new medium, and so it did in the Renaissance with the arrival of new kinds of song. First came numbers in which popular tunes might be counterpointed against more artful melodies, the two (or three) simultaneous texts allowing for double (or triple) entendre—when the new words were not outrageously explicit by themselves. Then, in the mid-16th century, there was a vogue for songs with short phrases in bouncy rhythm and simple harmony. Though French was the preferred language, such songs were evidently savored in many parts of Europe.

Our three anonymous settings, representing the earlier wave of bawdry, come from Burgundy (*De ma grièfve maladie*) and Spain (*Adieu, adieu* and *L'aie bein frique*). The four-part *De ma grièfve maladie* incorporates a popular song, *Se je ne suis mariée*, that follows an ABA pattern, the new song neatly prompting the old one to its repetition. In this case, the new words move in more stately fashion and (humorously?) mitigate the old. And though the persona in both cases is female, one may wonder about the authorship and intended audience. *Adieu, adieu* has just one text (which is enough), sung mostly in canon by the upper two of the three voices. *L'aie bein frique*, also in three parts, complements *De ma grièfve maladie* in that it is self-evidently a boys' song, and in that the new song is more graphic than the two old ones that are sung in alternation.

Evidently, it was quite all right for church composers to have a go at this sort of thing. Of the later authors here, all named, Pierre Certon was master of the choristers at the Sainte Chapelle in Paris, Nicolas Payen served in the Spanish royal chapel, and Clemens non Papa held various ecclesiastical appointments in his native Flanders. Their songs, in three parts (Certon) or four (Payen and Clemens), express naughty thoughts in their liveliness of phrase and echo, and sometimes also in details of word-setting.

With its text erased, the liveliness remained, and could become sacred jubilation, as we witness in Orlando de Lassus's transformation of Clemens's song. Recruited for the ducal court of Munich when he was in his mid-20s, Lassus remained in the German city. His five-part mass on *Entre vous filles* comes from a volume of masses he published in Nuremberg in 1581.

Sacred Eros

Music, so physical and yet so immaterial, is well fitted to travel between the sensual and spiritual and show them as one. Herbert Howells had devoted much of his life music for worship when, in 1974, he chose to set a poem by George Herbert (a rather better Wither, one might say) on this subject: "Church Music"—though he chose a sexier title. The words gave him an opportunity to discourse in music on music's power, but, as the eighth line will show, he had another reason for choosing them for a piece designed to mark David Willcocks's retirement as choirmaster of King's College, Cambridge.

Claudin de Sermisy overlapped in time and space with Pierre Certon, being similarly a royal musician in Paris. However, his suave *O Douce Amour* is worlds away from Certon's jauntiness, the

fleshly now beautifully sublimated in sound. The words have been attributed to François I, who was king of France (and Claudin's employer) when the song was published, in 1534.

It all leads back to the Song of Songs, the great warm source of earthly sacredness and spiritualized sex. Daniel-Lesur, a contemporary and friend of Messiaen, wrote his most celebrated piece, *Le Cantique des cantiques*, for Marcel Couraud's 12-voice choir in 1953, interleaving verses from the eponymous poem with (other) sacred texts in French and Latin. "Epithalame" (Epithalamium, or Wedding Song) is the last of the seven movements, turning the voices into a flame of bell sounds where body and soul burn together.

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Miller Theatre has commissioned writer and music critic Paul Griffiths to write the program notes for its 20th anniversary season of events.