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Monteverdi Madrigals

Claudio Monteverdi, the father of the modern opera who wrote on the cusp between the Renaissance and the Baroque, was the composer of nine books of madrigals. In these astounding works he painted in sound the images and thoughts suggested by his selected texts. So it might seem strange to hear these works in a textless setting, as a string quartet. What can I say other than I was overcome with jealousy towards those who get to live with this music? I recently saw a movie, *Reprise*, directed by Joachim Trier, in which there are some scenes where a conversation is heard in the background but one sees only gazes and glances between the characters involved. The import of the words is there even in their absence. Here, in this string quartet setting, Monteverdi's reflections of the words remain intact and the music is suffused with emotion every bit as specific as words allow. Rhetoric present in inflection can sometimes convey emotion even more honestly than the words it carries. We would like to think that much of the tenor of the text is still present here, and that the strengths of the string quartet medium closely parallel those of a vocal ensemble. We aim to give a convincing performance with shadow puppets.

This group of four madrigals is taken from the sixth book, a group of pieces that perhaps has autobiographical import as it follows the deaths of two women in Monteverdi's life: his wife and his favorite pupil, who had lived with him. Death and separation flavor the entire set.

Lasciatemi morire is the opening section of *Ariadne's Lament*, the text of which is "Let me die. How should I find comfort in this cruel fate, in this great suffering? Let me die." The painful yearning for oblivion is contrasted with the hope of peace.

Ohime il bel viso is a setting of a text by Petrarch. The text reads "Alas, the fair face, alas, the gentle grace. Alas, the graceful and noble bearing. Alas, the voice that humbled arrogance and cruelty, and made all cowards brave. And alas the sweet smile, whence issued that dart which was my greatest joy in this world: regal spirit, most worthy of an empire, but that it came down to us too late. I must burn with love and sigh for you, for I was yours, and having lost you cannot be grieved by any other misfortune. With hope and desire you filled me when from my highest bliss I parted, but the wind carried away my words."

Ditelo voi is the second section of the group of madrigals entitled *Tears of a Lover at the Tomb of his Beloved*. The text is "Tell, O rivers, and you who heard Glaucus rending the air with cries upon her tomb, deserted meadows, Nymphs

and Heaven, you know that grief has been my food, tears my drink, and since the ice-cold earth covered my beloved, your fair bosom, O blessed stone, has been my bed.”

Zefiro torna is also on a Petrarchan text. “Zephyr returns and brings back the sweet season and grasses and flowers, his sweet companions, and twittering swallows and lamenting nightingales, And Spring, white and rosy. The meadows smile, the sky is blue once more. Jove gazes upon his daughter with delight. Earth, air and water are filled with love; every creature renews its courtship. But for me, alas, the heaviest sighs return, rising from the depths of my heart, drawn by the one who took its key with her to heaven. And birdsong and the meadow flowers, and the sweet actions of fair and honest women are as a wilderness and cruel wild beasts.” Of special interest is the way in which the tempo and affect shifts as the poem speaks of the poet’s inner world in contrast to his surroundings. The setting of the final line is of particular beauty and pathos.

Note by Mark Steinberg