

*The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Department of Music, as part of the William S. Newman Artists series,
presents*

“It is time to die” Music of Giovanni Coprario for Viols and Voices

Brent Wissick, *viol* with special guests Parthenia (Beverly Au, Larry Lipnik,

Rosamund Morley, Lisa Terry) and David Morris, *viol*

with

Jeanne Fischer, Nora Burgard, *sopranos*; Laura Buff Alexander, *alto*; Timothy Sparks,

Henry Branson, *tenors*; Marc Callahan, *bass-baritone*

Sunday, October 10, 2021

7:30 pm

James and Susan Moeser Auditorium

Program

Fantasia a 6 No. 2 (untitled)

Giovanni Coprario (1575-1626)

Al folgorante sguardo

Su quella labra

Fantasia a 2

Fantasia a 3

Sospirando

Gray's Inn a 6

Intermission

Udite, lagrimosi spirit (with voices)

Luca Marenzio (1538-1612)

Udite (instrumental)

Coprario

Udite (with voices)

Che mi consigli, Amore (instrumental)

Che mi consigli (with voices)

Program Notes

Giovanni Coprario (1570-1626) started out as John Cooper, but italianized his name to strengthen his credentials at a time when England was obsessed with Italian musicians. Starting out in a cathedral choir as a boy, he became one of the most important composers and teachers of the Jacobean era, admired for his vocal music, viol consorts and other instrumental pieces. While he did travel on the continent, he probably did not go to Italy until later in his career, but he clearly knew Italian music early on. He was well connected to important families and eventually became a teacher to the Prince of Wales and the future King Charles I. With them in that classroom was the talented William Lawes, who eventually became an important composer himself and remained a loyal friend to the doomed King Charles. O, to be a fly on the wall during viol consort lessons run by Coprario with the young princes and their talented classmates in the 1620s, before the Civil War.

This program is mainly built around Coprario's six part music that clearly started out as either Italian madrigals, or fantasias in madrigal style. The second half of the program will include singers in texted pieces based on two major poets, and those pieces will in turn help make sense of some of the music on the first half. The pieces on the second half with the titles "Udite" come from the famous pastoral play in verse "Il pastor fido" (The loyal shepherd) by G.B. Guarini (1538-1612) that took Europe by storm, and was well known in England in both the original Italian and in translation. Two of the Italian titles on the first half, "Al folgarante" and "Su quella" also come from this large dramatic poem, although it appears that Coprario never carefully underlayed the words with his music except in the opening lines. But I do think these "instrumental-madrigals" still convey the narrative of the poetry: they tell a story of the lives and loves of the shepherds and shepherdesses in the mythical land of Arcadia.

Guarini's play ends with the wedding of the key characters, Mirtillo and Amarilli. I believe that the "untitled" viol piece we play to open this concert might have been a setting of this wedding chorus. It is in the key of F, the pastoral key (even into the time of Beethoven) and tracks the language of the poem, starting with "O Fortunata Coppia" (O fortunate couple) all the way through several moralizing lines about love and learning from it, a sort of wedding sermon. It ends with a passage of almost liturgical beauty and serenity, a sort of benediction. But we can't know for sure if this is what Coprario intended here.

Next we play the two pieces that are titled with lines from "Il pastor fido" but contain no other text beyond the titles. "Al folgarante sguardo" comes from a scene where the shepherd Mirtillo is telling his friend Ergasto how he lost his heart to Amarilli: it was her flashing glance followed by a look at her majestic face and serene smile. The final lines are more sensuous, as is much of the poem, referring to love hiding in her lips like a "mysterious bee" nestled between two roses. "Su quella labra" is from the following section of the poem and is even more explicit, describing the nature of their kissing. Reading the poem has certainly revised my approach to playing this viol piece, and I cannot play it with academic severity ever again.

The next two pieces are examples of Coprario's skills in the discipline of counterpoint. He did after all write up a small treatise called "Rules on How to Compose" and would have taught these principles to the young men in his classroom. Royal or not, they were shown how music can be put together; and this duo and trio reveal that the results can be delightful.

The piece "Sospirando" takes us back to the madrigal style, but now we have only the word for "Sighing" with no clear text from Guarini or anyone else. But Coprario would have been acquainted with numerous Italian texts about "sighs", and this piece uses many conventions of their musical settings. Even right at the start, the two treble viols seem to "sigh" at each other, intertwining like lovers through much of the piece. Sometimes the viols seem to depict birds and bees, and at the end of the piece there is even triple repetition of rhythm (a name?) and a surprising dissonance called a "cross relation" that could suggest a little death, the standard metaphor for (gasp!) an orgasm. There will be plenty more of this sort of thing in the fully texted madrigals of the second part of the program.

But before that, we will play a tuneful piece from a masque to which Coprario contributed music. The court masques were extravagant affairs involving verse, dance, elaborate stage sets, comedy, expensive costumes, and of course music. Coprario made several settings of his tune "Gray's Inn" which is quite catchy, and which was

sometimes known as “Coprario” because it was so associated with him. Not bad when you consider that some of the Jacobean and Caroline masques included verse by Ben Jonson and sets by Inigo Jones. Distinguished company that could easily upstage a musician, but John Cooper held his own. I love all the Coprario pieces on this concert, but the tune I go home humming is Gray’s Inn.

The second half of our program brings 6 singers on stage with us to perform madrigals with text. First is Marenzio’s 5 part setting of “Udite, lagrimosi Spriti” from “Il pastor fido”. Guarini’s tragicomedy is from 1590, and Marenzio’s setting dating from 1594 is the first of 22 based on this particular text.

Hear, mournful Spirits of the Underworld

Hear of a new fate of pain and torment, look at a cruel love in piteous guise:

My lady is more cruel than the inferno, since one death only cannot satisfy her greedy desire

(and my life is almost a perpetual death),

She commands me to live so that my life receives a thousand deaths a day.

This text is one of many that present the idea of a “little death” that I referred to earlier, and Guarini is far from the first to suggest a thousand deaths a day. Famous madrigals from the 16th century by Arcadelt and Rore attempt to depict this hyperbole in musical terms. I invite you to listen for any obvious word-painting when you hear the singers repeat the words “Mille morti” in Marenzio and in Coprario’s version. Coprario’s was probably composed around 1610, and I am certain that he honored Marenzio, one of the most admired madrigalists of the era, in his version in 6 parts.

The final piece on the program is based on one of the most venerated poets of the renaissance, Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374), who was still very much read in Elizabethan England. But for years it was not easy to discern who wrote the text for Coprario’s “Che mi consigli” because he omitted the opening words of Petrarch’s poem: “Che debbio far” (What shall I do?), starting instead with the second phrase “Che mi consigli, Amore” (What do you advise me, Love?) And the answer appears to be “Tempo e ben di morire” (It is time to die.) Here is the English translation of the words that Coprario selected from Petrarch’s poem, having left out quite a few lines.

What do you counsel, Love? It is the right time to die, and I have delayed longer than I would.

My lady is dead, and she has my heart with her; all my joy through her departure is turned into weeping.

Every sweetness of my life if taken away.

Petrarch’s original long canzone is clearly about his beloved Laura who died of the plague, inspiring many poems about his loss. But Coprario’s selective omissions suggest that his madrigal is not about Laura, but employing images of the “little death”. There is considerable anguish depicted in the middle of the piece that might be about “male difficulty” in joining the lady already “dead”. But there is a very happy moment around the words “all of my joy is turned into weeping”, and from there to the end, the upper parts are quite beautifully intertwined, with the whole consort in shimmering harmony. This music is emphasizing sweetness far more than loss, confirming for me that Coprario was not paying any attention to Petrarch and Laura in using this text.

There are numerous Coprario fantasias in 5 parts with Italian titles, but I think the ones in 6 parts we perform today are especially wonderful examples of the ways that renaissance courtiers, poets and musicians communicated in subtle metaphors. One can enjoy performing and hearing this music without them, but the experience is even richer when you consider them as well.

—Brent Wissick

About Parthenia

PARTHENIA is a viola da gamba quartet based in New York City that brings early music into the present with a ravishing sound and a remarkable sense of ensemble, animating both ancient and fresh-commissioned repertoire to critical acclaim. These “local early-music stars,” hailed by *The New Yorker* and music critics throughout the world, are “one of the brightest lights in New York’s early-music scene.”

David Morris from the Bay Area is a frequent guest with Parthenia.

Special Thanks

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