

Songs of love, polite and passionate

By Matthew Guerrieri, Globe Correspondent | June 5, 2007

CAMBRIDGE -- At Musica Sacra's Saturday concert of love-struck English and Italian Renaissance madrigals, opposites attracted. The 15th- and 16th-century Englishmen downplayed the melodrama of lovers' laments, placing even the most fraught outbursts within an elegant game of courtship; their Italian counterparts rendered each heartbroken cry with inconsolable sighs and violent clashes of harmony. It's no wonder opera originated on the banks of the Arno and not the Thames.

In John Bennet's "Let go, why do you stay me?" the text complains, "O new-found tormenting . . . I die for love," yet the music regards the prospect with relaxed equanimity. Not so Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina's "Io son ferito," which immediately followed; this description of the wound of love layers aching lines in clashing counterpoint that delays any sense of repose. Even the most poignant of the English numbers, Thomas Tomkins's "Too much I once lamented," inevitably gives way to tripping "fa la las." By contrast, in Luca Marenzio's "Fuggirò tant'Amore," a lover tries to abandon love, but ends each verse wallowing in the pain he vows to flee; each time, the harmony slips into an extraordinary, dissonant cadence, finishing on a bare hollow octave.

The chorus's pure timbre was built on quiet, focused vowels that bloomed into full resonance, echoing artistic director Mary Beekman's conducting style -- she often seemed to be pulling notes from the singers like taffy. The result was a wonderful balance, each chord shaped with sure intonation, but consonants were lost in the gradual tonal onset. This mattered less in the Italian repertoire, which packed its drama into the harmony; Biagio Tomasi's "Tirsi morir volea," with near-Wagnerian waves of sound, was particularly beautiful. But the English numbers, so dependent on the text, kept their distance.

Indeed, overall the evening lacked punch, a sense of the joyous, headlong risk of love. Even the program's most salacious exploit -- Giovanni Domenico da Nola's "Chi chi li chi," a lover's quarrel spelled out in delectable PG-13 glory, replete with euphemistic bagpipe grabbing and putting of birds into cages -- was inappropriately, well, appropriate. The concert's title quoted Shakespeare's insolent Puck: "Lord, what fools these mortals be." The music-making was lovely and assured, but, unlike true love, never veered anywhere near foolishness. ■