

Motets and Madrigals for a Mid-Winter Afternoon

St Augustine's, One Tree Hill, Sunday 29th January 2012, 3pm

motet (n.) - A polyphonic choral composition based on a sacred text and usually sung without accompaniment.
madrigal (n.) - A part song for unaccompanied voices with an amatory or pastoral text, developed in Italy and popular in England in the 16th & early 17th centuries.

Canonbie A Cappella is a group of 13 singers drawn from a variety of major London choirs including London Oriana Choir, Londinium City Voices, St Peter's Singers and SE23's own Fairlawn Singers. Originally formed as a choir performing at church and civil weddings, their repertoire of music for unaccompanied voices is drawn especially from the English and Italian Renaissance, but also stretches into the 19th and 20th centuries.

Singers: Maeve MacRory, Rebecca Swaine, Sarah Perrin, Angela Partington, Catherine Hibberd, Sonia Johnson, Susan Dean, Paul Quain, Paul Hadfield, Andrew Anderson, Chris Weston, Mike Bolton, Justin Needle.

William Byrd (?1540-1623) - Sing joyfully unto God

Byrd was Elizabeth 1's court composer and one of Europe's pre-eminent Renaissance composers of sacred music. His 6-part anthem, from the 1590s, was one of the most popular anthems of the Elizabethan age. Setting four verses of Psalm 81, it opens with a series of upward leaps, and includes syncopation and a brilliant series of fanfares ("Blow the trumpet in the New Moon!"). The repetitive final harmonies reiterate the splendid praise due the God of Jacob, and bring it to life in music.

Thomas Morley (?1557-1602) - April is in my mistress' face

Another leading member of the English Madrigal School, Morley was the most famous composer of secular music in Elizabethan England and an organist at St Paul's Cathedral. Published in 1594 and based on an Italian text by Livio Celiano, this is one of the best-known English madrigals: April is in my mistress' face, / And July in her eyes hath place. / Within her bosom is September, / But in her heart a cold December.

John Wilbye (1574-1638) - Lady when I behold

Wilbye is probably the most famous of all the English madrigalists. He spent his life serving the aristocracy of East Anglia and published just two volumes of madrigals. His style characterized by delicate writing for the voice and acute sensitivity to the text. This is a fairly typical example of the genre: a gentleman's paeon to the rose-like lips of his lover.

Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924) - Beati quorum via

The third in a set of three Latin Motets (Op.38), this 6-part piece is meditative in character and makes effective use of contrasting the three upper and three lower voices. It is regarded as one of Stanford's finest unaccompanied works. The text is from Psalm 119, verse 1: "Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the Lord."

Edward Elgar (1857-1934) - As Torrents in Summer

This partsong was originally written as the final chorus of King Olaf (1896), a cantata recounting the life, battles and death of a Norse crusader, with text by Longfellow. Though the cantata itself is now largely forgotten, it contains some fine music, including this partsong. The gentle harmonies evoke the soft fall of summer rain, building up like the rush of strong water before gently receding.

Thomas Tomkins (1572 -1656) - Oh yes! Has any found a lad?

One of the last of the English madrigalists, Tomkins was Byrd's pupil and was active at Worcester Cathedral and in the Chapel Royal. He composed lovely sacred and secular works in an essentially sixteenth century style, apparently little affected by the advent of the Baroque. Some of his works were lost when his house was hit by a cannon ball during the Civil War, but his son Nathaniel, also a Worcester musician, preserved many that might otherwise have been lost during these troubled times through his large edition of his father's works. This short and cheerful madrigal contrasts with Tomkins' great anthem, "When David Heard" (see below).

Thomas Morley (?1557-1602) - I love, alas, I love thee

A simple madrigal expressing a simple sentiment: I love, alas, I love thee, / My dainty darling. / Come kiss me then, come kiss me, / Amaryllis, / More lovely than sweet Phyllis.

Thomas Tallis (c.1505-1585) - If ye love me

Tallis, arguably the finest of England's early composers, drew the text of this anthem from the Gospel of John (14): "If ye love me, keep my commandments, and I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another comforter, that he may abide with you for ever, ev'n the spirit of truth."

Thomas Tomkins (1572-1656) - When David Heard

Tomkins was one of the prominent members of the English madrigal school. This 5-part anthem, from a 1622 anthology dedicated to his master William Byrd, has long been recognised as one of the supreme examples of late Renaissance music. The text is the well-known story of David's grief at the death of his son Absalom (2 Samuel 18:33). It falls into two sections, the first narrative, the second a profound exposition on the words "O my son Absalom, would God I had died for thee", the anguish building to the final searing outburst.

John Bennet (c.1575-1614) - Weep, O Mine Eyes

This was published by Bennet in his first collection of madrigals (1599). It was one of his most popular madrigals, using part of John Dowland's "Flow my Tears": Weep, o mine eyes and cease not, / alas, these your spring tides me thinks increase not. / O when begin you to swell so high / that I may drown me in you?

Thomas Tallis (c.1505-1585) – O nata lux

This 5-part motet, which sets two verses from an anonymous 10th Century hymn, probably dates from the composer's final period. The original hymn served the Office of Lauds during the morning of the Feast of the Transfiguration, when the disciples suddenly receive a vision of Jesus, shimmering with light and robed in angelic garb, conversing with Moses and Elijah. True to the text's mystical intensity, Tallis creates a passionate, harmonically vibrant and at times unusually dissonant setting.

Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) – Ecco mormorar l'onde

This is the best-known madrigal of Monteverdi's Second Book (1590). The love poem by Torquato Tasso which supplies the text was written for a young girl of noble extraction, and its images and words were chosen with great care for their capacity to captivate with the magic of their sounds ("murmuring waves", "trembling leaves", and so on). It inspired an early miniature masterpiece in which Monteverdi's individuality and genius are fully manifest.

Jacob Arcadelt (?1507–1568) - Il bianco e dolce cigno

Arcadelt was a highly influential Franco-Flemish composer principally of secular vocal music, active in both Italy and France. This 4-part madrigal ("The white and gentle swan") is his most famous composition, inspiring (probably) Gibbons' "The Silver Swan" (see below). The text draws an analogy between the gentle swan, who is thought to sing only at the sorrowful moment of his death, and the poet who sings at the moment of a much sweeter "death". This elegant innuendo is matched by a highly graceful musical setting.

Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625) - The Silver Swan

This famous madrigal presents the legend that mute swans sing only just before their death, and was published in Gibbons' First Set of Madrigals and Motets of 5 parts (1612). The words are probably the composer's own: The silver Swan, who, living, had no Note, / when Death approached, unlocked her silent throat. / Leaning her breast upon the reedy shore, / thus sang her first and last, and sang no more: / "Farewell, all joys! O Death, come close mine eyes! / More Geese than Swans now live, more Fools than Wise."

John Wilbye (1574-1638): Adieu, Sweet Amaryllis

Amaryllis is a character from the lengthy pastoral poetic epic 'Il Pastor Fido' by Italian Battista Guarini, a huge hit in both Italy and England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Amaryllis is a beautiful shepherdess and descendant of the god Pan who is initially thwarted in love because she has been promised to another. She then narrowly escapes being executed for infidelity, but is finally happily reunited with her beloved.

William Byrd (?1540-1623) - Though Amaryllis Dance in Green (1588)

This intricate 5-part madrigal is part of Byrd's relatively small secular output. The faithful shepherd who loves Amaryllis laments that his love does not seem to be returned: all will eventually end happily, however.

Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) – Motet: Cantate Domino (?1620)

The revolutionary Renaissance composer contributed this 6-part motet, which celebrates God's victory over the enemies of Israel, to an anthology of motets published by his pupil Giulio Cesare Bianchi. The text, adapted from Psalm 98, focuses on the musical imagery of songs and instruments, and invites all to joyous song raised up to God. It borrows at least one idea from an earlier madrigal, *Ecco mormorar l'onde* (see above).

Cole Porter (1891-1964) – Let's Do It, Let's Fall in Love

Written in 1928 for his first Broadway success, the musical *Paris*, this is the first of Porter's "list songs", featuring a series of suggestive comparisons and examples, preposterous pairings and double-entendres. Porter was an admirer of Gilbert & Sullivan, many of whose Savoy operas feature similar comic list songs.

There will be a retiring collection and refreshments following the concert in aid of St Augustine's Living Heritage Fund.