

NORWICH



NORFOLK



EXAUDI VOCAL ENSEMBLE

GESUALDO: CRUEL ECSTASY

Programme

Carlo Gesualdo (1566-1613): Madrigals from Books V and VI (1611)
Gioite voi col canto (Book V)
Se la mia morte brami (VI)
S'io non miro non moro (V)

Sylvia Lim (1992-): burst flood wound

'lo parto', e non più dissi (VI)
Asciugate i begli occhi (V)
O dolorosa gioia (V)

Joanna Ward (1998-): Living on Ice Cream and Chocolate Kisses
(World premiere, commissioned by NNF)

Itene, o miei sospiri (V)
Moro, lasso, al mio duolo (VI)
Languisce al fin chi da la vita parte (V)

Exaudi Vocal Ensemble

Emma Tring, soprano
Lucy Goddard, mezzo
Tom Williams, countertenor
David de Winter, Stephen Jeffes, tenor
Jimmy Holliday, bass

James Weeks, director

With thanks to Director's Circle Supporter Lynn Biggs

Gesualdo: Madrigals from Books V and VI

Four hundred years after his death, Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa, remains the most tantalising of musicians, the most alluring of myths. We are drawn back to the dark flame of this strange, obsessive music like moths to the candle, like lovers who can't let go. At the heart of his work we sense a mystery, an inward-turning, a kind of silence: its extreme chromatic harmonies and wild polarities no mere artifice or exoticism, but emanating from a soul whose nature is other, lying apart from us, outside our cosmology, orbiting a different sun.

This is music which begets myths, and its composer's sad and troubled life supplies plenty. In his time, Gesualdo was recognised to be of odd character. He was widely described as melancholic (a catch-all term), although we also hear that he 'talks a great deal, and gives no sign, except in his mien, of being a melancholy man.' Music was a consuming obsession for him: he would speak of nothing else, driving listeners to distraction and showing his works 'in score to everybody in order to induce them to marvel at his art.' The scholar Glenn Watkins hypothesises bipolar disorder; others have suggested that the diagnosis of an underlying Type B personality disorder (typified by instability of self-image and tendency to see things as all-good or all-bad) might illuminate his behaviour (and art). It would certainly be simplistic to assume that his notorious uxoricide, committed in 1590 when Gesualdo was 24, was the sole, or even main trigger for his psychological traits; rather, a picture emerges of a man whose underlying personality disorder is exacerbated by various physical and mental traumas at different points in his life into a final state of severe and constant mental torture. The music cannot help but reflect this, and without a doubt the polarities – of mood, texture, harmonic style – on which Gesualdo's style is based are indicative; but this is not incoherent, 'mad' music: it remains, for all its non-normative behaviour, lucid, communicative (albeit in a very extreme way), artfully structured and technically virtuosic.

The madrigals of the Fifth and Sixth Books, from which all the pieces in this concert are taken, are often described as 'late' works, having been published at the end of Gesualdo's life in 1611. Yet by Gesualdo's own assertion they were composed around the time of his extended sojourn at the court of Ferrara between 1594 and 1597, withheld from publication in the manner of *musica reservata* (a private music for the exclusive appreciation of connoisseurs) and only finally published in order to set the record straight and confound his several imitators and plagiarists. Gesualdo was, like many aristocratic composers of the time a natural avant-gardist, and the importance of his visit to Ferrara cannot be overstated. Since Vicentino's Ancient Greek-inspired experiments in chromatic and microtonal music in the 1550s, Ferrara was the undisputed capital of chromaticism: Vicentino's microtonal harpsichord, the archicembalo, could still be heard here in the 1590s, played by Luzzasco Luzzaschi, the madrigalist and maestro of the fabled Concerto delle donne. Gesualdo was highly struck by Luzzaschi's music, and it would seem that the two composers became engaged in some sort of madrigal-publishing duel, or at least mutual artistic exchange. If it is true that these works were written by the 30-year-old Gesualdo in Ferrara, we must jettison some of our most cherished ideas about his isolated, 'late' style and embrace instead the idea that these are works written by a young man in the blazing heat of inspiration, working in the very epicentre of musical innovation. (Comparison with Monteverdi, making a similarly radical transition in Mantua towards his own books IV and V over the course of the same decade, is inescapable.)

But the sounds of these pieces are not like those of Luzzaschi, still less Monteverdi. Gesualdo has taken the innovative premise of Ferrarese chromaticism to a place that is overwhelmingly personal and profoundly subjective; in these works he seems to be speaking to himself, composing in order to converse with and alleviate his own melancholy rather than to portray or palliate it for others. *Io pur respiro, io parto, io moro...* the focus on the first-person singular, the 'I' of the introspective self, is relentless. Emotions oscillate between extremes, of manic joy and lugubrious despondency. Equilibrium is sought but never found, consummation is continually yearned for yet remains fleeting if not entirely illusory. Ungraspable and elusive, too, is the experience of the music. Once is never enough: the consummation we desire, the sense of emotional wholeness and completion, continually evades us, slips away, luring us back again and again, just as almost every madrigal treads and retreads the same expressive ground, the same unreconcilable extremes of emotion, circling and obsessive. We are drawn in, fascinated, haunted – the music blazes then evaporates into the air – we are left to wonder at these strange messages while they last, and let them fade into the silence which surrounds them.

James Weeks

burst, flood, wound

The words were assembled from the fifth and sixth books of Gesualdo's madrigals. In their original context, they expressed the extremes of Gesualdo's emotions – joy, grief and longing. Here, removed from his perspective (without the first-person singular 'I'), there is space to consider them from a different viewpoint, with undertones of his violent uxoricide. The work takes from Gesualdo's music its alternation between slow harmonic material and quick polyphonic imitation (reflected in the polyphony of breaths and spoken text).

Sylvia Lim

Living on Ice Cream and Chocolate Kisses

The brief for this piece was to respond in some way to the music of Gesualdo, specifically with respect to the "highly masculine perspective on love and desire" that his madrigals manifest. This brief made me think about how I, a young woman in the present day, experience – or 'practice', if you like – falling in love; and I realised it's often attached to or expressed through love songs. These songs, to which I listen obsessively, often come to express for me the essence of falling in love – it's a cliché for a reason. And in my practice I am often borrowing from others' musics, so it follows that the songs in this new piece are love songs which have resonated with me in the past few months. With this starting point, the piece considers a personal turning away from a masculinist way of thinking about, and doing, 'love' – considering what that could entail emotionally and philosophically, and how that might map onto a musical or sonic experience.

Joanna Ward

Biography

EXAUDI is one of the world's leading vocal ensembles for new music. Founded by James Weeks (director) and Juliet Fraser (soprano) in 2002, EXAUDI is based in London and draws its singers from among the UK's brightest vocal talents.

EXAUDI's special affinity is for the radical edges of contemporary music, at home equally with maximal complexity, microtonality and experimental aesthetics. The newest new music is at the heart of its repertoire, and it has given hundreds of national and world premières. As well as performing the acknowledged greats of contemporary music, EXAUDI is particularly committed to the music of its own generation and is also strongly involved with the emerging generation of young composers, regularly taking part in composer development schemes and residencies at home and abroad.

An enduring feature of EXAUDI's programming has been the mixing of contemporary music with the music of the medieval, Renaissance and baroque periods. In 2012 the EXAUDI Italian Madrigal Book was launched as an open-ended project to create new repertoire to stand alongside the masterpieces of Monteverdi, Gesualdo and others; as well as numerous appearances in the UK, the Book has toured to France, Luxembourg, Belgium and Italy, creating and recording new repertoire with each new installment.

EXAUDI has appeared at many of the leading European and UK venues and festivals, broadcasts regularly on BBC Radio 3 and European radio stations, and has released fourteen critically acclaimed recordings on the NMC, ÆON, Métier, Winter&Winter, Mode, Confront and HCR labels.

EXAUDI's disc, Gesualdo Madrigali, was released in September 2019, subsequently receiving a prestigious Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik and being named as one of BBC Radio 3's Discs of the Year.

Gioite voi col canto

mentre piango e sospiro
né dal mio lagrimar punto respiro.
Ahi misero mio core,
nato sol al dolore,
piangi, ma piangi tanto
che vinta dal tuo pianto
sia la mia donna e poi rivedi in lei
gli affanni e i dolor miei.

Rejoice you with singing,
while I weep and sigh
and can scarcely breathe through my tears.
Ah, my wretched heart,
born only for pain,
weep, but weep so much
that by your complaining
my lady is won over and then you will see in her
my own care and pain.

Se la mia morte brami,

crudel, lieto ne moro,
e dopo morte ancor te solo adoro.
Ma se vuoi che non t'ami,
ahi, che a pensarlo solo
il duol m'ancide e l'alma fugge a volo.

If you desire my death,
cruel one, I die happy,
And after death adore you alone.
But if you desire that I not love you,
ah, with the thought alone,
grief kills me and the soul flees in flight.

S'io non miro, non moro

non mirando, non vivo;
pur morto io son né son di vita privo.
O miracol d'amore,
ahi, strana sorte,
che'l viver non fia vita, e'l morir morte.

If I do not look, I do not die;
not seeing, I do not live;
yet dead I am though not deprived of life.
O miracle of love,
ah, strange fate,
that being alive does not make life, nor dying, death.

burst flood wound

Burst
Bite
Blaze
Burn

Breathe

Flood
Flee
Faint
Flight

Tell

Wound
End
Born
Cease

'lo parto' e non più dissi, che il dolore

privo di vita il core.

Allor proruppe in pianto e disse Clori,
con interotti omèi:

'Dunque ai dolori io resto. Ah, non fia mai
ch'io non languisca in dolorosi lai.'

Morto fui, vivo son, ché spirit spenti
tornaro in vita a sì pietosi accenti.

Asciugate i begli occhi

deh, cor mio, non piangete

se lontano da voi gir mi vedetel

Ahi, che pianger debb'io misero e solo,
ché partendo da voi m'uccide il duolo.

O dolorosa gioia,

o soave dolore,

Per cui quest'alma è mesta e lieta more!

O miei cari sospiri,

miei graditi martiri,

del vostro duol non mi lasciate privo

poiché sì dolce mi fa morto e vivo.

Itene, o miei sospiri,

precipitate il volo

a lei ch'è m'è cagion d'aspri martiri.

Ditele per pietà del mio gran duolo

ch'or mai ella mi sia

come bella, ancor pia

che l'amaro mio pianto

cangerò lieto in amoroso canto.

Moro, lasso, al mio duolo

e chi può dar mi vita,

ahi, che m'ancide e non vuol darmi aita!

O dolorosa sorte,

chi dar vita mi può, ahi, mi dà mortel!

Languisce al fin chi da la vita parte

e di morte il dolore

l'affligge sì che in crude pene more.

Ahi, che quello son io,

dolcissimo cor mio,

che da voi parto e per mia crudel sorte

la vita lascio e me ne vado a morte.

'I am leaving', I said, and no more, because grief
deprived the heart of life.

Then Chloris burst out in tears and said,
while sobbing 'alas':

'Thus I stay here in sorrow. Ah, never may I cease
to languish in lamenting songs.'

I was dead, I now live, for my extinguished spirit
returned to life at such merciful tones.

Dry your lovely eyes,

ah, my love, do not weep

if far from you you see me wandering,

Ah, that I must weep miserable and alone,
for in leaving you, the grief kills me.

O painful joy,

o sweet suffering,

through which this spirit is sad and dies happy!

O my dear sighs,

my happy torments,

of your suffering do not leave me deprived

for so sweetly it makes me dead and alive.

Go, o my sighs,

speed your flight

to her who is the cause of my bitter torment.

Tell her, for pity's sake, of my great suffering –

that if she will be to me

as merciful as she is beautiful,

I shall change my bitter lament

joyfully into a love song.

I die, alas, of my grief,

and she who can give me life,

ah, kills me and will not give me help!

O painful fate,

that she who can give me life, ah, gives me death!

He languishes towards his end who is leaving life,
and the suffering of death

afflicts him so much that he dies in cruel pains.

Ah, that person is I,

my sweetest love,

that I am leaving you, and through my cruel fate

I leave life and go to death.

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