SINGING EMOTIONS: VOICES FROM HISTORY

EDITORS JANE DAVIDSON AND REBEKAH PRINCE
This book is the outcome of an industry partnership launched by the Australian Research Council’s Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions (CHE) with Musica Viva through July and August 2012. A series of pre-concert talks accompanied the German vocal ensemble Amarcord’s touring programs based on the history of song, and the themes of love and murder.

Chief Investigators, Postdoctoral Fellows and Associate Investigators of CHE contributed talks, each presentation interpreting a different aspect of the musical offerings. Lindsay Lovering of Musica Viva referred to the fascinating array of talks as: ‘informative, entertaining and clearly well researched — all noted and appreciated by the many present.’

The pre-concert series transpired as follows:

- 17 July, Perth Concert Hall
  - Jane Davidson and Philippa Maddern
- 19 July, Adelaide Town Hall
  - Katie Barclay
- 21 July, Sydney City Recital Hall
  - Alan Maddox
- 24 July, Canberra Llewellyn Hall
  - Merridee Bailey
- 26 July, Melbourne Recital Centre and 1 August, Queensland Conservatorium
  - Samantha Owens
- 28 July, Newcastle Conservatorium
  - Rosalind Halton (CHE guest)
- 30 July, Sydney City Recital Hall
  - Barry Spurr
- 31 July, Melbourne Recital Centre
  - Stephanie Trigg

This current volume offers up some of these talks along with additional material from associates of CHE, exploring the relationship between singing, emotion and history.

Affective experiences throughout history have been shaped by the culture and context of human engagement. While the names and meanings ascribed to emotions have changed over time, there are nonetheless common psychological, physiological and behavioural features of humanity that remain constant. In the Australian Research Council’s Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions (Europe 1100-1800) we investigate the passions in four research programs that ask: how do understandings, expression and performance of individual and mass emotions change over time; how do we best understand the roles of nature and culture in the formation of emotions, both individual and communal; and how do emotional understandings, expression and performance affect political, social and cultural developments even up to present-day Australia?
AmArcord

Amarcord is an a cappela ensemble from Leipzig made up of former members of the St Thomas Boys Choir: Daniel Knauft, Wolfram Lattke, Martin Lattke, Frank Ozimek, and Holger Krause. The first professional adult ensemble to come out of the choir after the Fall of the Wall, the group takes its name from Federico Fellini’s Oscar winning film, whose name means, ‘I remember’. Holger Krause said, ‘It’s more than a double meaning. We remember our childhood, we remember the tradition at the time of the music, the periods and epochs we have on our repertoire.’

Indeed the group has a rich musical and cultural heritage in the city of Leipzig, where they have founded their own music festival. They remember their shared history, growing up in the St Thomas Boys Choir singing the songs of Bach near the tomb where he was buried, under the looming threat of East Germany. During this oppressive time in their city’s history the Boys Choir provided them with a unique opportunity for freedom of expression through music, and occasional travels around the world as representatives of the German Democratic Republic’s endorsement of the arts.

The people of Leipzig also have a great respect for music and the arts. Unlike the neighbouring city of Dresden, whose musical establishments were funded by the royal courts, the music of Leipzig was supported by average citizens. The Boys Choir itself, which provided rigorous musical training, predates even Bach, having been founded in 1212. Thus, the members of Amarcord had a specialised upbringing in a city abounding in musical tradition.

Amarcord now tours internationally, performing unaccompanied vocal music ranging from early medieval through to contemporary pieces. They have won numerous awards, and their 2012 tour in partnership with Musica Viva and the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions was the group’s second time in Australia.

‘Music is also about emotions, and sometimes it’s hard to keep your emotions back. So you have to transport emotions by singing, but sometimes it’s so overwhelming what you do in a nice church for example - it’s almost sacred music - and then you feel this special tension in the air. There’s more than you yourself standing. It’s something between the listeners and we as singers, what we sing. It’s more than the summary of five.’

HOLGER KRAUSE, OF AMARCORD
THE POWER OF SINGING

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One of the most compelling theories attempting to account for the universality of human music-making is based on the idea of mutuality — the behavioural and emotional coordination between two individuals who need each other for their own individual reasons (Dissanayake, 2009, p. 23). Ellen Dissanayake believes that as hominid babies were extremely helpless at birth, mechanisms evolved to ensure nurturance. These mechanisms were firstly, and common to all mammals, lactation, that not only provides nourishment for the infant, but also produces the release of hormones such as opioids and oxytocin that guarantee the mother’s devotion to the infant — producing feelings of love and trust. The second mechanism is found in the coordination of behaviour that is referred to by the neurobiologist Colwyn Trevarthen as ‘communicative musicality’ (see Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009). The interaction is founded upon a lifting bodily rocking and sung utterances commonly called ‘motherese’, and includes other accompanying special bodily movements and facial expressions.
Whether or not we accept these theoretical propositions, music/singing and movement/dance are often regarded as the same concept in many cultures. Thus it is important to recognise the positive and integral relationship between them: music and movement literally help to bind us together, and movement is a key component of emotional reactions to music. This idea has been recognised since at least the time of Aristotle (Scherer & Zentner, 2001), and more recently discussed by Edmund Gurney (1880) and Carroll Pratt (1931). A different theoretical account of early hominids’ use of group singing and dancing proposed by Jordania (2009) also highlights this music/movement relationship. He argues that the repetitions and melismatic qualities that appear in music have been developed to invoke deep emotional experience; for example, a communal trance-like state. We know that this sort of behaviour is still observed in cultural practices such as the highly energetic Haitian Vodou song and dance rituals, or the deep meditative, gentle and slow-paced but highly repetitive rhythms and pitches of quiet Buddhist chants. Jordania’s theory proposes that at one extreme of cultural development religious ritual practices emerged, often contrasting in intention, such as the very different examples of Haitian and Buddhist cultures. At the other extreme, intense fast rhythms and deep bass sounds were developed for war/military practices. For example, American soldiers in the Vietnam War in the 1960s were encouraged to listen to heavy rock music to pump themselves up in battle contexts. So, evidence reveals that rhythmically strong music affects us, making us move faster and often in more aggressive actions. Studies of motoring show a significant increase in speed and aggression of drivers when listening to music with a loud and heavy rock beat. Biological research shows that when we are singing in group contexts oxytocin, the ‘trust’ hormone, is produced. Thus, we are given to feeling greater connection to people with whom we have sung. This biological outcome of group singing undoubtedly offers a context for positive social behaviour through singing. But, of course, if music is an evolutionary adaptation, it may have come about through several other adaptations that we could consider proto-musical (Cross, 2009). In his Origin of Species of 1859, Charles Darwin believed that human music came from courtship song he had observed in primates. This argument was taken up in recent years by Miller (2000), suggesting that music is a technology for fitness-display in sexual selection: the singing voice signalling control and self-confidence; the rhythmic ability of dance showing complex movement skills and also revealing coordination, strength and so health and power.

How exactly music and/or song can influence human emotions remains a much-debated question. At one extreme, some theorists (Kivy, 1989; Levinson, 1990; Zangwill 2004, 2007) deny that music can actually make the listener feel a true emotion. Their argument rests largely on the idea that emotion has to have an ‘object’ — to feel fear, we have to be afraid of something; to feel sorrow, we have to have something to be sorry about (a death, a loss, a departure). But there’s no true life-object in music; therefore, according to Zangwill (2004, p. 29) ‘music, in itself, has nothing to do with emotion.’ But this theory runs counter to reported experience and also completely contradicts a very long history of musical theory — from Pythagoras onwards, classical, medieval and early modern philosophers have accepted the idea that music can directly influence emotions. Thus, one song form expressing triumph or thanksgiving which first appears in Homer’s Iliad, is the ‘paean’. These were usually intended for a chorus but at times were sung in monody, and it seems that Pythagoras and his followers would sing ‘paeans’ to improve their moods. In the early medieval period, Boethius transmitted...
Pythagorean theories to the western world in his De Institutione Musica, (written in the 6th century) — relating the story of how Pythagoras calmed a young man who had become distressed by the sound of the Phrygian musical mode. The young man, so the story says, discovered his ‘harlot’ in the house of another man and was ready to burn the man’s house down. This frenzy was attributed to his having been listening to a flautist playing in the Phrygian mode. He responded to reason when the music was changed to the slow and rhythmic Spondaic mode, illustrating the great power music was believed to have over the emotions.

More modern psychologists offer a number of explanations by which music and song might affect listeners emotionally [see Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008]. These span the gamut of purely biological (and hence probably universal) reactions to emotions generated out of cultural, and even personal histories. At one end of the spectrum, it’s very likely that sound — including music — sets off some brain stem reflexes. Emotion is induced owing to one or more fundamental acoustical characteristics of the music that are taken by the brain to signal importance and urgency — necessary survival information. Thus, as a form of auditory information, music is likely to elicit emotional response like any other environmental event. On the more cultural level, it’s possible that music affects us through emotional contagion — the listener perceives the emotional expression of the music and then ‘mimics’ this expression internally.

NEW AND UNEXPECTED HARMONIES RESULTED IN SHIVERS OR CHILLS IN THE LISTENERS

It’s likely that a mix of all these processes operates; and if so, this would explain why some emotional reactions to music seem to be extremely widespread, if not absolutely universal, while others are clearly cultural. Thus, one important study by John Sloboda (1991) identified particular musical formations which seem to reliably induce certain emotions in listeners. He found that sequences and appoggiaturas (both of which can delay an expected harmonic resolution) consistently evoked tears in his participants. New and unexpected harmonies resulted in shivers or chills in the listeners. But by contrast, a disastrous cultural misunderstanding is revealed in the musical tale of the Dutch explorers who landed in New Zealand in 1642. The Dutch mistook the Maori shell trumpet calls they heard as their boat came into shore as a ceremonial welcome. They responded to the ‘greeting’ with fanfares on their own musical instruments. However, a bloody attack by the Maoris ensued, as they had perceived the Dutch fanfares to be war calls to arms. The music’s meaning and affect was different in each cultural context.

Whatever the true origins of music and singing, or the mechanisms by which it affects us emotionally, its use as a technology for social coordination is powerful, suggesting that singing is at the root of the musical/emotional and social sharing experience. No wonder, then, that some cultures regard singing
to be such a powerful activity that they have stories of human creation indicating that humans were sung into existence [a strong belief in Indigenous Australian cultures]. And no wonder, either, that if there's one socio-cultural activity we know to be practically universal, it's singing. We can't think of a culture worldwide in which people don't sing, and generally sing together (either as performers or listeners).

Singing in all human cultures has developed a structured core: song. Across cultures and exploring the historical records we know, song is organized in a series of rhythmic and melodic patterns. Indeed, the use of melodic patterns based on several tones — or a type of scale — is a fundamental characteristic of song forms from every culture and period in history, offering a structural framework through which to sing specific affective content. The simplest of these forms is reproduced through unison singing. Songs have also been developed by several people singing in parallel motion or with call-and-answer phrases, or drone bass lines and canon — the staggered entry of different voices imitating an original melody. From these ‘basic’ forms we can trace through historical records an evolving sense of elaborations in musical structure, including melodic sequences and harmonic/musical punctuation that ultimately developed into the musics of Western and Eastern popular and high art traditions. Thus, the syntax and context of music generally, and song in particular, have become much more elaborate over the course of history, and the emotional meaning has changed over the centuries.

But the question we want to reflect on is, what is singing for? What social functions does it serve? Particularly in the period from 1500-2000, from which Amarcord’s programme was selected. We have said enough already to suggest that the function of singing is not just aesthetic (though of course we do get aesthetic pleasure out of singing and hearing others sing — otherwise we would not attend concerts). In fact, modern theorists have identified many functions for song in human evolution. Daniel Levitin, for instance, identified six basic functions — knowledge, friendship, religion, joy, comfort, and love (2008). So, songs can be used to pass on vital cultural information — as in many Indigenous communities, where certain types of sacred knowledge descend through ‘song lines’. But they also evoke memories, even in those who may suffer dementia with increasing age. Jane Davidson has been carrying out a large-scale study with six choirs of seniors over the past five years in
Perth, Western Australia. As one elderly member of one of the choirs recorded:

I wouldn’t say I got teary, but when you haven’t heard those songs for so many years and your memory goes back…to when you sort of…family company and that.

The carer of a 102-year-old dementia resident at a nursing home remarked:

She’s so much more engaged and engaging when she’s in the singing group.

Songs act to reinforce feelings of friendship, cohesion, and even intimacy. This quote comes from a senior woman, new to group singing, who joined a choir for older people:

Being in a group and singing is a deeply physical and emotional experience. I can feel the hairs rise on the back of my neck as I feel the vibrations of the low male bass voices singing behind me. When people get older, they don’t experience physical contact the way they used to when they were young. When I sing, I can literally feel the caress of the breath of others close to me; I can feel us all breathing together, being close and intimate in the harmonies.

From the point of view of a social historian, as Philippa is, song is particularly fascinating, as a medium accessible to almost all humans, and usable in almost all situations. From the 16th to 20th centuries, songs were sung in the salons of the incredibly wealthy and aristocratic, the courts of kings and emperors — and by beggars in the streets. They were sung in taverns, and in churches, at weddings and at funerals, before audiences of two or three, or by thousands in public venues, by and to women, men and children. In short, songs were sung everywhere, for every occasion.

‘WHEN I SING, I CAN LITERALLY FEEL THE CARESS OF THE BREATH OF OTHERS CLOSE TO ME’

What better means, therefore, of getting a message, or an emotion across than by putting it in a song? What sorts of messages? Again, the range is almost exponentially wide. Sometimes it’s a clever and evocative bit of scene painting, as in the Jean Cras song-cycle, Dans la montagne. In L’appel de la cloche, the voices are deliberately made to recall the evening Angelus bell; both by the text (which has special ‘ó’ sounds incorporated in it by the composer), and by a type of head voice specified. Presumably the song sparks memories in the listeners by the processes Jane has outlined above — and with those memories, imaginations of scenery, of places, of experiences, and of emotions.

Sometimes the message is a joke, pointed by the music. In Ein henlein Weiss, Antonio Scandello uses hen imitations in a quite complex and high-level form of music (the madrigal) to announce the great event — ‘the hen lays an egg!’ But why is that a good joke? It’s partly because, in the 16th century when that song was written, songs were news media. News ballads would be printed out, on individual sheets, with a well-known tune named at the head. Then they’d be sold in the streets (probably with the sellers singing them as they went); and the buyers would sing them on to new audiences. That way, news — or political opinion — could spread like wildfire through even an illiterate population. There was a whole genre, for instance, of execution ballads. Instead of our TVs telling us that a major crime figure, like Tony Mokbel, has been imprisoned for so many years, there would be a ballad, reporting the execution of a notorious criminal, often with what we might think of as inappropriate glee (in the 19th century, for instance, one ballad entitled On y a coupé la tête — ‘They cut off his head’ — was sung to a can-can tune).

So when we hear songs like Ein henlein weiss, or Orlando di Lasso’s Bonjour, et puis, quelles nouvelles (which ends up boasting about the singer’s girlfriends), we have to think that for 16th century people, they are a form of satire — a bit like the spoof newspapers produced by students on Prosh day.
Of course satire can be directed anywhere. We know that individuals were satirized in the streets of London and Paris as early as the 12th century. There’s an Anglo-Norman song about an unsuccessful lover, for instance:

Do you want to know the story
Of how Little Willy wastes his time
Over a girl who can’t get far enough
away from him?

Night and day he goes begging her not to be unkind
‘O please, my darling, my sweet little snubnose
Please take pity on your lover’

Songs are also a fine medium for saying what would probably not be said openly just in speech. Take Matona mia Cara — look at the first lines, and you’d think it’s just another decorous courtly love song:

I’m looking for a song
To sing beneath your window

But as it goes on, you realize the song is more about big-noting the singer, probably to the embarrassment of its ostensible object. When you get to the last verse, where the singer decides he’ll boast to the whole world about his sexual prowess (’I’ll go the whole night long/strong as a ram’), one wonders whether Matona [if she existed] really wanted anyone singing these lyrics outside her window.

Why should songs function this way? I think it’s because they are almost impossible to control. In medieval Europe, for instance, the increasingly culturally dominant Catholic church tried to ensure that only certain sorts of music and chants were practised — the ones that produced the most moral emotions, or the most devotional responses. So the Cistercian monastic order, founded in the early 12th century, and dedicated to reforming both religion and society, tried to regulate the composition of church plainchant, stipulating that melodies were to stay within a range of ten notes in order to preserve an aura of seriousness and devotion (Hoppin, 1978).

But what was the result? Even though plainchant might be strictly organised, how could the use of it be controlled? It wasn’t long before anonymous secular composers were using religious plainchant as the basis for three-part motets whose upper two voices were anything but religious. Take the 13th century motet L’autre jour/Au temps pascour/In seculum for instance. The lowest voice sings part of the Easter service:

This is the day that the Lord made…
Praise the Lord…
For his mercy endures forever

But the second voice recounts a day of peasant merry-making, with Robin and Marian as principal characters, and a heavy underlying connotation of sexual rivalry:

At the time of Easter
All the shepherds of the countryside

Got together in a valley
Hébert led the dance in the meadow
With pipe and tabor
Robin was not pleased
When he saw it
But out of defiance
Set himself to dance a better estampie
So he seized his drone, took up his hat
Tucked up his tunic
And danced a fine estampie
For the love of his sweetheart
Roger, Billy and Walter are dead jealous
They’re not laughing
They say defiantly
That before nightfall
His pipe will be worn out and broken
[Huot, 1997, p. 173; Rothenberg, 2011, p. 67]
do they prove that someone knows a song? Short of 24-hour surveillance to catch someone singing a forbidden tune, it can’t be done. Regulating singing has been tried (in Ireland, at times, it was illegal even to whistle certain melodies that might recall anti-government words) — but never very successfully.

Every folksong, then, just by being a folksong, preserves from the past an alternative voice — not just the pre-occupations or priorities of the rich and famous, but the reactions of the ordinary people, to whom, maybe, the stories of kings and conquests that fill the official chronicles of the day weren’t at all important or relevant to their lives.

There’s a neat little twist on that issue even in the anonymous text of the dance-song Quand je bois du vin clairet. Yes, it’s just a drinking song:

When I drink claret
My friend, everything goes round and round and round and round
But what’s the chorus?
Let’s sing and drink
Let’s make war
On whom? the king’s enemies? No —
‘on this bottle’.

Songs give us a huge variety of entertainment — funny, soulful, evocative of moods and landscapes, witty. But I hope, as we listen and laugh, or reflect, or even weep, that we’ll also remember we do so because the song isn’t just an amusing bit of culture. The song is an essential part of being human; it’s a way of creating and arousing social emotions, such as trust, mutual solidarity, intimacy, empathy; of achieving religious states, of stimulating memory and establishing communities; of passing on political messages, and giving voice to the oppressed. In short, it’s a whole powerful medium of social communication on all levels.

**ENDNOTE**

1 The next five paragraphs are based on a piece of writing prepared by Sandra Garrido and Jane Davidson, and Sandra’s contribution is acknowledged here.

**REFERENCES**


SINGING OF EXECUTIONS: BALLADS AS NEWS MEDIA IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

UNA MOLYVENNA
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Singing of Executions: Ballads as News Media in Early Modern Europe

PLATE 1
William Hogarth, The Idle ‘Prentice Executed at Tyburn, Plate 11 of Industry and Idleness series, © Trustees of the British Museum

UNA McILVENNA
THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

Kind hearted men, a while give eare
And plainly Ie unfold
The saddest tale that ever yet,
By mortal man was told.¹

It would seem odd for us to turn on the TV and hear a newscaster sing the news, but in early modern Europe information about newsworthy events was regularly set in verse and sung through the streets. These ballads, often set to familiar tunes, were usually printed on single-sheet broadsides and sold by itinerant vendors who would sing the song as a means of advertising their wares. The songs recounted the news of foreign battles, natural disasters, monstrous births, royal scandals and — the biggest seller of all — executions². Unlike traditional songs of love, courtship and marriage, these songs about genuine persons and events performed a function that we do not expect of song today: they related factual information. Usually highly sensational and full of emotive language, the ballads deliberately sought to guide the listener’s responses to the often tragic events they depicted.

This early modern form of news media raises questions about the role of emotions in the transmission of fact-based information, and why song is no longer an acceptable medium for the conveyance of news. We tend to view song only as an art form in our modern, Western world, primarily because the conjunction of words and music is perceived as imbuing the words with greater affective strength. Words cannot therefore be sung if one is conveying factual material. Song is seen as too subjective, too emotional. We expect news to be impartial and objective; emotions in this context seem to preclude the truth. But was that always the case? What was the role of ballads in the dissemination of information about public executions, for example?

To put these execution ballads into some kind of context, it is helpful to consult the engraving by William Hogarth, The Idle Prentice Executed at Tyburn (Plate 11 from his Industry and Idleness series). In it, the unfortunate Thomas Idle is paying the ultimate price for his descent into vice and we see him drawn to the gallows at Tyburn, London’s notorious execution site. Pride of place in Hogarth’s engraving, however, is not given to Idle, but to the female ballad vendor placed centre stage. Carrying a baby and poorly dressed, she epitomises the stereotype of ballad-sellers across Europe, marginal figures...
who generally lived at or below the poverty line. Amidst the din of the chaotic crowd, she sings the contents of the pamphlet she holds: The last dying Speech & Confession of --- Tho. Idle. Given that Idle hasn’t quite reached the gallows yet, this fraudulent claim — obvious to anyone present at the execution — was a regular ploy used by ballad writers and printers to heighten the emotional impact of the ballads, which were often on sale on the day of the execution itself. Often written in the voice of the condemned criminal, the ballads were a powerful warning to listeners and singers of the ballad to eschew temptation so as to avoid the same fate.

A spectator who bought one of these ballads and sang the tune could therefore imagine themselves in the position of one who stood on the precipice between life and death. The emotions of fear, remorse and shame could be experienced vicariously, if only briefly, by anyone who chose to sing, for example, Anne Wallens Lamentation, For the Murthering of her husband Iohn Wallen. This ballad, set to the sombre tune of Fortune My Foe, depicts Anne as a scold, a wife who regularly railed at her husband, eventually murdering him, but who has seen the error of her ways and enjoins the spectators at her execution (in particular, wives) to view her punishment as both just and cautionary:

If ever dyed a true repentant soule,  
Then I am she, whose deedes are blacke and foule  
Then take heed wives be to your husbands kinde,  
And beare this lesson truely in your minde,  
Let not your tongus oresway true reasons bounds,  
Which in your rage your utmost rancour sounds:  
[...]  
In burning flames of fire I should fry,  
Receive my soule sweet Jesus now I die.3

Although the ballad presents Wallen as remorseful, one witness to her punishment, Sir John Chamberlain, questioned the justice of the sentence given that her husband was violent and she had acted only in self-defence:

That morning [22 June 1616] early there was a joiners wife burnt in Smithfield [sic] for killing her husband. Yt the case were no otherwise then I can learn yet, she had summum jus [extreme right, or excessive rigor of the law], for her husband having brawld, and beaten her, she took up a chesill or such other instrument and flung it at him, which cut him into the bellie, wherof he died.4
The ballad presents select truths of the case (that Anne’s husband was a turner in Smithfield, that she killed him with one of his tools, that she spent three days in Newgate Prison before the assizes court came to judge her) but couches them within a moral lesson of uxorial obedience which elides her husband’s violence. This was standard practice for ballads about murderous wives, which sought to create an image of transgression and disorder contained and destroyed. A disobedient wife, never mind a murderous one, presented a threat to the early modern patriarchal society and the ballad therefore presents an unequivocal message of the state’s power to erase this transgressive threat. Significantly, framing these events in a song encouraged the repetition and memorisation of the moral lesson with each performance. Moreover, putting the ballad in the voice of the condemned, repentant criminal meant that anyone who sang it could imagine herself in the place of the punished wife, remorseful of her wife's disobedience.

The performative nature of song, and its ability to reach a diverse audience, meant that it was a highly effective means of delivering information in the early modern period when literacy levels were still low. The standard, formulaic message of warning and repentance in execution ballads could be transmitted to a wide range of people of all classes, whatever their level of education. In this way, ballads both participated in and reinforced the didactic exercise that public execution existed to provide. As a spectacle of deterrence that presented its viewers with a glimpse of a soul about to enter Heaven or Hell, public execution encouraged its audience to meditate on their own lives and chances of salvation. In their communal, performative nature, execution ballads thus also allowed their public to take an active role in the theatre of punishment.
ABOUT THIS BOOK

EMOTIONS AND HISTORY

AMARCORD

ARTICLES

The Power of Singing
Singing of Executions: Ballads as News Media in Early Modern Europe
Musical Patronage and the Dresden Opera
Music and Emotions in 18th Century Thought
Rhetoric and the Performance of Recitative
From Glee Club to Concert Hall
Singing Fear: Sinophobia and Opera in 19th Century Australia
Love and Marriage in History: Devotion, Lust, Despair and Betrayal
The Aspirant Body: Love, Death and Song

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES
The following article sheds light on aspects of early modern German music. Though not strictly related to singing, German musicians today, such as the singers in the group Amarcord, descend from this rich cultural heritage. Indeed the great master, Johann Sebastian Bach, who was choir director at St Thomas church in Leipzig from 1723 to 1750 also had a presence at the court of Dresden where he held an honorary position. From 1738 he was listed in published Dresden court records along with the court church composers as ‘Joh. Seb. Bach Tit.’.

Whilst acknowledging certain of his numerous illegitimate children, the charismatic Saxon Elector and King of Poland August II (also known as ‘der Starke’: 1670–1733) had one legal heir only: Electoral Prince Friedrich Augustus (1696–1763: See Plate 1). Between 1711 and 1719 this prince, who had been raised at the court of his pious Lutheran mother and estranged wife of August II, Christine Eberhardine, undertook a Grand Tour of France and Italy. Following his father’s example, the prince converted to Catholicism, thereby enabling him to later become a candidate in the elections of 1733 to find a successor to his father. Between 1716 and 1717 the electoral prince was established in Venice where musical works began to be dedicated to him by composers seeking his patronage. Among the compositions offered at this time were twelve sonatas by the violin virtuoso Francesco Maria Veracini (1690–1768) dated ‘Venezia 26 Lugio 1716’, an oratorio La Pace di Kamberga by Johann David Heinichen (1683–1729), and the opera Ariodante by
misgivings caused by his change of
by August II whose subjects, despite
with meticulous attention to detail
(1699–1757), an alliance long hoped
the elder daughter of the late Emperor
Friedrich Augustus moved to Vienna
Between 6 October 1717 and 4 March
the Saxon Electoral Prince
Joseph I, Archduchess Maria Josepha
where he engaged in the courtship of
Kapellmeister to the prince, and
of Veracini as a chamber composer and
violinist to the Dresden court. By 1719
each was paid the high annual salary
of 1200 Thaler. The greatest musical
initiative of the electoral prince, however,
was the employment for a series of
seasons for Dresden of an entire opera
company which was organised and
directed by the Venetian composer
Antonio Lotti (c. 1667–1740), who brought
a company of singers — including his
wife the soprano Santa Stella and the
castrati Matteo Berselli and Senesino
(Francesco Bernardi), instrumentalists,
and set designers to Dresden.

Between 6 October 1717 and 4 March 1719 the Saxon Electoral Prince August II moved to Vienna where he engaged in the courtship of the elder daughter of the late Emperor Joseph I, Archduchess Maria Josepha (1699–1757), an alliance long hoped for by August II. In September 1719 the newly-wed couple returned to Dresden to a rapturous reception. Numerous visitors were attracted to the city at that time to witness the magnificent festivities held to celebrate this union. These events were planned with meticulous attention to detail by August II whose subjects, despite misgivings caused by his change of
religion, adored both him and his son. There were some qualms, however, about Maria Josepha and the Austrian Piety she might bring into Lutheran Saxony. Among the month-long celebrations Lotti’s opera Teofane was produced. Heinichen composed a serenade titled La gara degli dei which was performed by the royal musicians on the Elbe river, and a French divertissement titled Les quatre saisons with music composed by the Dresden court Kapellmeister Johann Christoph Schmidt (1664–1728) was staged in the open air. Among the many musicians who came to Dresden at this time to see and hear the musical events were Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767) and his long-time friend, George Frideric Handel (1735–1759). He visited the Dresden opera empowered and financed by directors of London’s Royal Academy of Music to secure singers for their forthcoming operatic projects in London. During this visit Handel gave a harpsichord recital for the king and prince for which he was rewarded with the payment of 100 ducats. In the year following these events rehearsals of Heinichen’s opera Flavio Crispo began. Two of the Italian castrati, Berselli and Senesino, accused Heinichen of incompetence in the setting of Italian texts. The manuscript of the offending
aria then being rehearsed was torn up and thrown at Heinichen’s feet, causing a scandal that brought the Dresden opera to a halt. The Italian singers were discharged, August II closed the opera (thus finalising his financial commitments to the imported musicians), and Berselli and Senesino were now free to take up Handel’s offer to travel to London.

Without opera, musical attention in Dresden became increasingly focused upon the Catholic court church which, for the following decade, flourished with strong royal support. Nevertheless, the artistic tastes of the electoral prince and Maria Josepha were beginning to have an impact in Dresden. Their desire for the return of Italian opera led to a project that saw the beginnings of strong and continuing operatic traditions in Dresden: in 1724 seven young Italians — three women and four castrati — were selected to be trained over the following years in Venice and Bologna. They arrived in Dresden during June 1730 and were heard soon after when, accompanied by the renowned court orchestra, they sang a now-missing cantata on the River Elbe during military exercises organised by August II. In July 1731 an Italian-trained German-born composer Johann Adolph Hasse (1699–1783) and his wife, the brilliant soprano

MUSICAL PATRONAGE AND THE DRESDEN OPERA | Janice Stockigt | The University of Melbourne
Faustina Bordoni (1697–1781), also arrived in Dresden at the invitation of the court. Together, these two superstars came to earn 6000 Thaler annually — a huge salary when compared with the wages of the other musicians. The production of Hasse’s opera Cleofide on 13 September engendered great interest and excitement, not only because of the ravishing singing: Dresden now heard a new musical style emanating from Naples and Venice known as the stile galant. Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) and his eldest son Wilhelm Friedemann (1710–1784) travelled to Dresden at exactly that time. On 14 September Johann Sebastian gave a recital on the Silbermann organ of the Lutheran church of St Sophia in the presence of the Dresden court musicians and virtuosi, and it is probable that both father and son attended a performance of Cleofide, an opera based upon the text Alessandro nell’Indie (1729) by Imperial court poet Metastasio (1698–1782).

When August II died on 1 February 1733 Dresden had been elevated from a Saxon city into a major European centre. His son and heir became the new Saxon Elector Friedrich August II, and later that year was elected King of Poland. August III (as he was now titled) became a powerful patron of the arts and Maria Josepha supported the Dresden court music (and particularly the music of the Catholic court church), eventually arranging for the purchase of the musical libraries following the deaths of various court composers and musicians. Thus, a copious collection of secular, sacred, and instrumental compositions came into the royal collection of the Dresden court, and today this repertoire draws numerous performers, musicologists, and editors to the Saxon State and University Library in Dresden where much of the collection remains. Here is kept the set of parts that were dedicated to the elector in 1733 of Bach’s Missa in B Minor (BWV 232). As King of Poland, August III was in a position to pursue in earnest his great passion, the fine arts. Advised and aided by Francesco Algarotti and Ludovico Bianconi, the king greatly augmented the art collection of his father. In 1745 he purchased the entire gallery of the Duke of Modena. Three years later, in 1748, August acquired 56 works from the Imperial Gallery in Prague. Giovanni Battista Tiepolo’s painting The Banquet of Cleopatra which today hangs in the National Gallery of Victoria (Plate 2) was obtained for the beloved hunting castle of the royal and electoral family, Hubertusburg, and in 1752 negotiations began for the acquisition of Raphael’s painting known as the Sistine Madonna of c. 1513–14, a work that arrived in Dresden in 1754 at the cost of 25,000 Roman scudi. In 1772 the Englishman Charles Burney (1726–1814) visited Dresden during his research into the music in the Low Countries, Austria and Germany. He regarded Dresden’s royal art collection as ‘the first and most considerable in Europe, both for the number and excellence of the paintings it contains.’
The Venetian artist Bernardo Bellotto (1721–1780) who painted in and around Dresden between 1747 and 1758, recorded the later years of the construction of a new Catholic court church, a building commissioned by August III and designed by the former architect to Peter the Great, Gaetano Chiaveri (1689—1770). Today, this Catholic Cathedral of the Diocese of Dresden-Meissen and the recently-restored Lutheran Cathedral, the Frauenkirche, constitute the most important elements of the ensemble of buildings that still shape Dresden’s skyline.

Dresden’s crowning musical glory was the opera. Of all performing arts, opera displayed the magnificence of a prestigious and cultured ruler. The heroic character of a Baroque opera tended to mirror the patron. In Hasse’s opera Cleofide, for example, the character of the magnanimous Alexander the Great might be seen to be August II, a role he’d taken in a Carousel in 1695. Maria Josepha probably saw herself reflected in the character of the devoted and faithful heroine Cleofide. From 1734 on, and with few exceptions, at least one new opera was produced annually for the Dresden court. These were mostly composed by Hasse to texts of Metastasio. After 1733, new operas were usually given during the hunting season at Hubertusburg on the birthday of August III (7 October), and during the Carnival season in Dresden. In 1738 a performance of the newly-composed opera La Clemenza di Tito with libretto by Metastasio and music by Hasse (a work described as being of an ‘exquisite nature’) drew great applause from the spectators. Spectacular ballets performed by French dancers were incorporated into Dresden’s operas, and short comic operas (intermezzi) were sung between acts. The 19th century historian Moritz Fürstenau recounts how on 5 February 1753 the opera Solimano by Hasse to the libretto of Dresden court poet Giovanni Ambrogio Migliavacca (c. 1718–c. 1795) was performed in the recently-remodelled and enlarged opera house Am Zwinger. Solimano was staged thirteen times during the Carnival season of 1753 and audiences were full of admiration for the splendid production. The especially remarkable sets were created by Giuseppe Galli-Bibiena (1696–1757), who also had been responsible for the remodelling of the opera house. Equally admired were the ballets arranged by the Dresden court ballet master Antoine Pitrot (1727–post 1792), who appeared at the end of Solimano as the character ‘Bassa’ with a grand entourage that included four large elephants (these were puppets) with towers led by dwarfs. From each tower two male and two female dancers leapt to the stage. Live elephants, horses, and camels were loaned from the royal stables to appear on stage during Act I. A stage orchestra and numerous silent ‘extras’ were needed. The popularity of this opera was so great that it was reported that for the twelfth performance the ladies of the Dresden court hired the court’s Swiss Guards to reserve their seats until their arrival. For this production the Dresden opera house was illuminated with new lamps which provided brighter light and reduced the danger of fire. After Burney visited this opera house in 1772 he wrote:

I went to the great theatre, where the serious opera used to be exhibited. It was built…by Augustus the second; but was afterwards decorated, and the stage much enlarged, by Augustus the third. I was extremely curious to see this celebrated scene of action, where general Hasse, and his well disciplined troops, had made so many glorious campaigns, and acquired such laurels; all his best works having been expressly composed, as some of Metastasio’s dramas were written, for its use. No money was ever taken for admission into this theatre, which is nearly as large as that at Naples. It has five rows of boxes, thirty in each, is of an oval form, like the theatres in Italy, and has an orchestra capable of containing a hundred performers.

After the arrival of Hasse the Dresden court orchestra more than doubled in size. Players from the ensemble were heard at intimate court concerts in special rooms set aside in the Dresden palace by Maria Josepha. Here, music was listened to with close and critical attention. At her command, operatic and oratorio rehearsals were held there in the presence of the queen and invited guests.
Discipline within the Dresden opera orchestra was remarkable: before an operatic premiere Hasse discussed performance details of the new work with concertmaster Johann Georg Pisendel (1687–1755), who then went through the beautifully prepared parts (most are now missing from Dresden). These were then marked up with bowings and dynamics. A German contemporary was astonished to see this royal orchestra perform in the pit of the opera, noting that the violinists appeared to have their arms forced into parallel movement by a hidden mechanism, a feature of French orchestral playing perhaps, but a disciplined approach which then seems to have been unusual.

New operas were composed for special occasions in the royal and electoral family, especially the celebration of those marriages that created alliances between Saxony and the courts of Naples, Spain, Munich, and Versailles. Numerous musical works were written for and dedicated to members of the Dresden court (particularly to the electors and family members). Saxon princes and princesses were no mere dilettantes: all had received a thorough musical training. Today the Saxon State and University Library holds compositions written by August III’s musically-gifted daughter-in-law, Maria Antonia Walpurjis Symphorosa (1724–1780), the wife and cousin of Saxon Electoral Prince Friedrich Christian (1723–1763). In 1740 a Dresden-based writer Johann Gottlob Kittel (d. 1751) published a poem in which he dreamt that Apollo called the virtuosi of London, Vienna, Paris, Rome, Naples, Madrid, and Dresden to Parnassus for a musical competition. The performances of the winners — the Dresden musicians — are described by Kittel in wonderful detail. Hasse’s keyboard playing, Faustina’s glorious voice, the music of court church composer Jan Dismas Zelenka (1679–1745), and the virtuosi who sang his sacred music were all highly acclaimed. But Apollo’s final praise was reserved for their patron, August III, because this ‘Lord of miraculous gifts’ ruled and governed in a manner that brought perfect harmony to his subjects.

If only this King and his Prime Minister, Count von Brühl, had paid more attention to military matters! At the beginning of the Seven Years War [the last of the Silesian Wars, 1756–1763] Saxony and the courts of Naples, Spain, Munich, and Versailles were defeated by the Prussians during the Battle of Lebosit (1 October 1756). August III and his Prime Minister spent the next years exiled in Poland. Maria Josepha remained in Dresden, at her wish, with her children. She died during 1757 and although Frederick II had humiliated this queen, she was spared the mortification of witnessing her family’s flight to Munich to avoid the horrors of the siege of 1760 when Dresden became a major battle ground between Prussian and Austrian forces.

In 1763 August III returned to Dresden where he died on 5 October, leaving his eldest surviving son Prince Friedrich Christian to succeed as Elector of Saxony. But within two months this new Elector also passed away. Hasse composed the requiem masses for the funerals of both August III and Friedrich Christian, and these were to be the last of his works for Dresden.

In 1772 Burney observed that during the reign of August III the city was regarded as the Athens of modern times, and the arts — especially music, poetry, and painting — were loved and cherished by this King with ‘a zeal and munificence greater than can be found in the brightest period of ancient history.’ Visitors to Dresden today enjoy remnants of the patronage of these Electors of Saxony and Kings of Poland, but do they pause to wonder whether the excessive magnificence of the Elector-Kings led to the distresses that came to be suffered by Saxony?
MUSIC AND EMOTIONS IN 18TH CENTURY THOUGHT

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The power of music to shape emotion, to stir the passions and inflame the mind was commonly recognised by both philosophers and the general public across the 18th and 19th centuries. As the 18th century Scottish writer, James Beattie, argued in his essays on music, ‘the end of all genuine music, is to introduce into the human mind certain affections.’ Jonah Barrington, an Irish judge, made this clear when reflecting in his memoirs on his participation in the Irish Volunteer militia in the 1780s. He bemoaned that the air chosen as the march for the Volunteers claimed ‘no merit whatever, being neither grand, nor martial, nor animating’. He continued that this was most obvious when the Volunteers’ march was compared to the music of the revolutionaries in France: Though composed to excite enthusiasm in both instances, who can hear the Marseillaise Hymn, Ça Ira and the other revolutionary music of France, and consider the frantic enthusiasm which they excited, without thinking that the sober, stupid tones of the Volunteers’ march were more calculated for a soporific than a stimulant.

Music generated emotion by producing a physical response within the body, which in turn formed the appropriate emotion. How music affected the body was a matter of debate. The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau developed a popular theory in his ‘conjectural’ history, where he used evidence from societies in other countries that he believed to be ‘uncivilised’ to imagine the behaviour of his ancestors. He believed that music was the original form of expression, predating language in early societies, as it was best able to communicate the emotions that drove primitive man: ‘it is neither hunger nor thirst, but love, hate, pity, anger that pulled from them the first utterances’. Music was able to convey the singer’s emotion and, in turn, provoked feeling in the listener, allowing them to communicate. For Rousseau, these first utterances were musical, as language required a higher level of cognition and the use of reason. Despite the evolution of language, music was believed to have retained its power over the emotions, appealing to primitive instincts.
While the exact mechanics of how music evoked emotion was a matter of debate amongst Enlightenment thinkers, only a few individuals rejected the idea that music and passion were linked. This led to discussion about the relationship between particular sounds and emotions, with considerable energy invested into exploring and charting what tones created what passions in the body. Beattie noted, ‘courage is apt to vent itself in a strong tone of voice’, while soft music was associated with gentle emotions. Interestingly, he was sceptical that music could create negative emotions, arguing that ‘it might be practicable, by means of harsh tones, irregular rhythm, and continual dissonance, to work the mind into a disagreeable state, and to produce horrible thoughts and criminal propensity, as well as painful sensations. But this would not be music’. By contrast, Irish thinker Edmund Burke acknowledged the power of a variety of types of sound on the body. He divided sound, and particularly music, into the ‘sublime’ and the ‘beautiful’. The sublime ‘forced’, while the beautiful ‘flattered’ the body into emotional compliance with its sentiment. The relationship between music and emotion became central to shaping musical style, so that great consideration was given to the emotional impact when writing music and determining its cultural value. Particular genres of music became prized. Rousseau argued that Italian opera was superior due to its effectiveness in joining lyrics with music to express particular emotions. It also led some philosophers to give primacy to music with lyrics, arguing as Beattie did that: ‘in vocal music, truly such, the words render the expression determinate, and fix the hearer’s attention upon it,’ ensuring that ‘the hearer is in no danger of being seduced from the principal air’. Lyrics, associated with language and so with reason, contained and controlled the passion of the music. This was particularly important in the mid to late 18th century when emotional control, or reason applied to passion, became increasingly prized as a marker of ‘civilised’ behaviour.

As a result, musical fashion followed emotional trends. As with the literature of the period, the 18th century public demanded music that expressed ‘delicate sentiment’, making the strong tones and passion of the baroque, associated with the composers Bach and Handel, outdated for a time. Musical forms such as the opera seria, that were associated with complex emotional states like melancholy or sublime glee, became highly prized and associated with the elites; performances of such music commanded entrance fees that excluded all but the very rich. By contrast, music that was associated with more ‘straightforward’ or everyday emotions, such as love, grief and anger, were played in musical venues aimed at lower social groups and found in balladry and popular song. So, music became a tool for demarcating emotional sophistication and ‘civilisation’.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MUSIC AND EMOTION BECAME CENTRAL TO SHAPING MUSICAL STYLE

This is not to say that the reception of music was not complex. In both Britain and Ireland, there was some resistance to opera as a ‘foreign import’ that provided competition to local productions. In a context where most opera continued to be performed at private functions or at restrictively expensive prices, such resistance may also have reflected a democratic challenge to a model that associated musical and emotional sophistication with access to a form of music that was unaffordable to those lower down the social ladder.
RHETORIC AND THE PERFORMANCE OF RECITATIVE

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When we listen to vocal music by 18th century composers like Handel, Vivaldi or Mozart, we tend to focus on the beautiful set-piece arias which allow singers to show off their dazzling coloratura or melting lyricism. But that is only half the story. A large proportion of any 18th century opera or cantata was taken up with recitative dialogue — half-way between speech and song — which conveyed the plot and set up the emotional trajectory of the drama.

So how did early modern singers perform their recitatives? The problem for musicians trying to understand this today is that the written scores provide very little specific information about how to perform them — for practical purposes, nothing beyond the words and a series of pitches. Even the notated rhythms are nominal at best, and there are no explicit indications of other crucial aspects of expressive performance such as loudness, phrasing, vocal colour, and pacing.

Luckily, some authors from the period have left us important clues about performance practice. The 13th chapter of Giambattista Mancini’s treatise *Riflessioni pratiche sul canto figurato* (Practical reflections on figured singing, 1777) is titled ‘On the knowledge necessary for one who wishes to recite well in the theatre’ or, to paraphrase, ‘How to perform recitative’. Mancini made it clear that he regarded spoken declamation as the appropriate model for recitative delivery:

> Now the vocal line of either [secco or accompagnato] recitatives, although sung, ought always to be free in such a manner that it resembles a perfect and simple spoken declamation. Thus it would be a failing if instead of reciting [the Italian word is *dire*, literally: ‘speaking’] the recitative with a free voice, an actor wanted to sing it with a constant legato, without ever thinking to distinguish the periods and the various meanings of the words by holding back and reinforcing, detaching and sweetening the voice, as an educated man does when he speaks or reads.¹
Amongst Mancini's suggestions about the things an aspiring singer should study is a crucial clue about the way to gain the requisite skills in declamation:

...listen to the speech of a good orator, and hear how many rests, what variety of tones, how many different emphases he uses to express its meanings. Now he raises his voice, now he lowers it; now he hurries a bit, now he grows harsh and now gentle, according to the various passions that he wishes to stir in the listener.\(^2\)

Mancini's description provides some important parameters with regard to dynamics and pacing, for example, but how can we go beyond this broad description and gain a deeper understanding of the kind of model for delivery he had in mind? To answer this question we need to understand who 'good orators' might have been, what they did, and how they were trained.

In the 18th century, oratory was not merely good public speaking, it was a specific set of skills taught as the culminating stage of training in the art of rhetoric. To put it another way, oratory was classical rhetoric put into verbal, audible practice. The principles of good delivery were set out in treatises addressed to aspiring orators, such as the Retorica (Rhetoric, 1574) by the Florentine nobleman Bartolemeo Cavalcanti.\(^3\) While this treatise dates from two hundred years before Mancini's, Cavalcanti's ideas on delivery belong to a classical tradition that leads from ancient Greece through at least as far as the late 18th century. Like other contemporary rhetoricians, Cavalcanti emphasised the importance of delivery: good delivery can make a poor case seem more convincing than a good one. Indeed, according to Demosthenes' famous aphorism, there are only three really important things in oratory — delivery, delivery, and delivery.

**GOOD DELIVERY CAN MAKE A POOR CASE SEEM MORE CONVINCING THAN A GOOD ONE.**

Another book which was extremely influential throughout the period was Cypriano Soarez' *De arte rhetorica*\(^4\) (On the Art of Rhetoric), which appeared as early as 1569, but remained current as the chief rhetoric textbook in Jesuit schools throughout the 17th and 18th centuries.

Soarez was one of a number of 16th and 17th century rhetoricians who drew on classical sources, especially Cicero & Quintilian, but also on other, 'second Sophistic' authors who placed a strong emphasis on Affect — that is, the speaker's ability to work the emotions of the audience. This tradition of rhetoric took its cue from the ancient Greek rhetorician Gorgias's view that 'the effect of speech upon the condition of the soul is comparable to the power of drugs over the nature of bodies'.\(^5\) The often-quoted criticism of Gorgias's style of oratory was that it was so powerful that it was equivalent to 'putting a knife in the hands of a madman in a crowd'.\(^6\)

Given the importance of affect to Soarez, it is not surprising that his treatise devotes considerable attention to delivery. He begins by defining the elements of *pronuntiatio* (delivery), following the classical tradition of Cicero & Quintilian:\(^7\)

...it is agreed that all action is contained in two categories: the sound of the voice and the movement of the body...In fact these alone move an audience to the greatest degree, because at the same time the voice has impressed their ears, gestures their eyes, and words their thoughts...

At the very beginning of the Introduction, the orator will narrate in a more open tone of voice; he will grow more forceful with a sharper tone; he will convey grief in a wavering tone; the affective climax having been built up in a subdued tone, he will proclaim it in an elated one...he will not declaim for a long time in the same register, nor will he seem to read the speech, as it were. But he will control the variation of his voice in accordance with a variety of circumstances and effects...Neither is sluggishness pleasing in an oration...nor is an excessive volubility and haste.

In order that an oration may be distinctive, it should be observed where and in what manner it is to be
broken up or sustained...Where there might be a pause, or a certain small emphasis, shorter intervals should be used...

For the end of the oration, if it is designed to be stirring, a restrained and more intense tone, with a rousing enunciation, is appropriate; if designed to be pleasing, a gentle one; if it is for exhortation, a tone both forthright and balanced is suitable; if for grief, let the tone be supple, if for rejoicing, let it be fulsome and jovial.

Similar ideas come through clearly in the Dissertatio de Actione Scenica (Treatise on Acting, 1727) by another Jesuit, Franciscus Lang, which was regarded as the textbook on acting in 18th century Jesuit school dramas. Lang says that the first virtue of delivery is naturalness, taking into account the audience and the size of the space. Another is to match emotional delivery to the sense of the words, feeling them oneself in order to more powerfully move the passions of the audience. On the variation of the voice he, not unexpectedly, echoes Soarez:

...care should be taken to vary the voice, so that it is used vigorously, then immediately mildly, now strongly, now softly, now precipitately, now calmly, according to what reason and nature seem to ask of one.8

The significance of Lang’s book is not so much in any innovations he makes, rather the opposite — although written more than one hundred and fifty years after Soarez, it is entirely in line with Soarez’s principles, which in turn are closely based on Cicero and Quintilian. Equally, Mancini’s description of the qualities of a good orator are perfectly consistent with the principles set out by Soarez and Lang.

Thus, while the prevailing style of music changed dramatically between the late 16th century when Soarez was writing, and the appearance of Mancini’s treatise in the late 18th, the underlying aesthetic principles governing delivery remained remarkably consistent through these and a whole range of other treatises. These principles include:

• Close attention to the sense of the words, which are to be enunciated clearly. Their emotional content is to be conveyed both generally, with regard to the overall affect of the passage, and in detail from word to word.

• In conveying the words, there is an emphasis on pronounced variety and flexibility of delivery; ugly sounds are never called for, but on the other hand in recitative there should absolutely not be a continuously ‘sung’ delivery which concentrates on beautiful sound at the expense of vivid expression.

• This variety is valued across virtually all of the parameters of vocal delivery — pacing, articulation, vocal colour, volume. In effect, it is only the composer’s specification of pitch (in itself not entirely definitive) that separates recitative from spoken declamation in the high style.

And above all, the goal of declamation throughout the early modern period was to move the audience — to stir the passions of the soul.
Above all, the goal of declamation throughout the early modern period was to move the audience — to stir the passions of the soul.

ENDNOTES

1 Giambattista Mancini, Riflessione Pratichesul Canto Figurato (Milano: Giuseppe Galeazzi, 1777; reprint, Facsimile, Arnaldo Forini, n.d.), 239. Translations not otherwise attributed are my own.


3 Venetia: Camillo e Francesco Franceschini, 1574

4 Cipriano Sodrèz, S.J., De Arte Rhetorica Libri Tres ex Aristotelo, Cicerone et Quintiliano Pracipue Deprompti (Antwerpiae [Antwerp]: Vviduam Henrici Thieullier, 1722). It is perhaps some measure of the longevity of Soarez’ influence that I am told by Adam Harris, to whom I am indebted for help with the translations of Soarez, that he was still being referred to at a Jesuit high school in Australia some twenty years ago.


6 ibid.

7 Sodrèz, De Arte Rhetorica, 187–90. Translation by Adam Harris.

8 Franciscus Lang, Dissertatio de Actione Scenica Cum Figuris Eandem Explicantibus et Observeationsibus Quibuscumque de Arte Comica, Auctore Franciscus Lang, Societatis Jesu: Accessusserunt Imagines Symbolicae Pro Exhimitione et Vestitu Theatralri (Monachii [Munich]: Riedlin, 1727), 58. Translation by Adam Harris.

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FROM GLEE CLUB TO CONCERT HALL

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Modern concert programming offers such a wide variety of music from centuries past that it is easy to assume such eclectic sampling of the western classical repertoire is a recent habit, part of the culture of our own age. The idea of audiences taking pleasure in music created in a remote era is not an obvious form of entertainment, and it is often said that our current age is the first to value music of the past over that of the present. But increasingly, research on concert activities and music societies of the 18th to 19th centuries indicates a more complex story of revival and re-creation. How and when did early music, or *Alte Musik*, start to bounce back into the musical imagination of the concert audience? What attitudes have audiences brought to listening to music not of their own era, and what was the function of ‘old’ music before it reached the concert platform?

Questions of context and perception are bound up with the type of program presented with humour and irony to a 21st century audience by Amarcord. The program, *Music of Love and Murder*, dips into a wide chronological range of music born out of very different circumstances from the concert platform. The story of the revival of such repertoires differs from one country to another, often based around charismatic figures committed to reviving music of the past — sometimes for reasons openly patriotic, sometimes transcending motives of nationalism.

In Paris, for example, the Concert Society organised from the 1830s by Louis Niedermeyer was not primarily focused on promoting French music of the past. The most performed composers from the 1840s when the Society flourished were anything but French: Palestrina, Lassus, Vittoria, Marcello, Handel, and Haydn [already considered ‘old music’]. The Society employed four choir directors while Niedermeyer edited much of the music, publishing eleven volumes of Renaissance and Baroque choral music with the Concert Society (Sako, 2002). By 1845 a religious music journal had been established with an emphasis on plainsong. The position of Palestrina as the ‘pure’ ideal of sacred music seems to have become established round about this time. Consisting of 80 to 100 members, the choir of the Concert...
Society appears to have been a massed ensemble, far from the one-a-part ensemble exemplified by Amarcord, which in the modern concert scene is arguably modelled on the string quartet — or at least the 17th century Italian idea of the madrigal.

In the case of England, the restoration of old music and its establishment in the modern repertoire did have a distinct flavour of pride in the national pool of creativity. The interest in performing music from the past was underway at least a century earlier than this 19th century French revival. This came about largely through the influence and efforts of two men: Dean Henry Aldrich of Christ Church College Oxford (a position he held from 1681-1710), and later by Johann Christoph Pepusch (1667-1752), a German-born musician who took a leading role in shaping the activities and repertoire of the Academy of Ancient Music. The Academy's aims were defined as ‘searching after, examining and hearing performed the Works of the Masters, who flourished before and about the Age of Palestrina: however, not neglecting those who in our Time have become famous’ (quoted in Weber, 1992, 62).

As well as subscription concerts, this movement of ‘early music’ revival resulted in the foundation of societies for active participation. The history of this revival itself has been researched and documented from a comparatively early stage in scholarship on music-making in England. The Oldest Surviving English Musical Club by Reginald Nettel (The Musical Quarterly, 1948) is a study of the Madrigal Society, founded in 1741 by John Immyns, who acted as amanuensis to Pepusch (Nettel, 1948, 99). The Madrigal Society included in its repertoire madrigals of the great 16th century composers Byrd, Weelkes, Wilbye, Marenzio; typically, it was from its origins a male-only environment, but lasting throughout the 19th century, it eventually saw the admission of ladies after World War II (Nettel, 1948, 108).

The Nobleman’s and Gentlemen’s Catch Club — displaying its aristocratic origins and aspirations in its title — was founded in 1761, ‘meeting every other week at a tavern between November and June, [and offering] drinks, dinner, and singing, ending with catches sung by all’. As time went on, according to Weber (1992, 147-8), it became ‘more respectable, less preoccupied with sex and drinking’. The Glee Club, founded by Samuel Arnold in 1788, was seen as ‘a kind of poor man’s Catch Club’. And then there was the Concentores Society, founded in 1798, in which members were ‘required to prove their skill in composing of performing music in the antique style’ (Weber, 1992, 193).

It was of course not only in London that such singing clubs flourished. Bath and Edinburgh were among the cities in which a Catch Club was part of the musical activities for those who wished to participate and not just listen. A contemporary History of Edinburgh reports: ‘There were many excellent voices in the catch-club, who sung their part at sight; and the easy cheerfulness which reigned in this select society, rendered their meetings delightful’ (Burchell, 1996, 61). In Bath it was a different story: ‘The Catch Club was apparently forcibly dissolved to prevent undue competition with the subscription concerts, but it was replaced by the Harmonic Society, which...proved so popular that it must have posed a far greater hazard’ (Burchell, 1996, 113). Indeed, the large choral festivals generated oratorio performances in regional centres throughout England in the 18th century. Associations such as the Nobleman’s and Gentlemen’s Catch Club, and the Madrigal Society, fed into the Concerts of Ancient Music, a central part of London concert life throughout the 18th century. Choral Festivals, such as the Three Choirs Festival of Worcester, Hereford, and Gloucester and the Choir Festivals of Manchester, in turn
formed the breeding ground for major events of national significance such as the Handel Commemoration. From its extraordinarily successful inauguration in May/June 1784, this celebration of British music-making and the music of Handel became for a decade at least an annual event. Here a new level of emotional response to polyphonic singing seems to have been reached in London — produced partly by the massed forces of five hundred performers, partly by the unprecedented size of the audience, and partly by the attendant discomfort merging into a sense of exaltation at the ‘power of harmonical combinations’ (Halton, 2012). These were large-scale events designed to create an awe-struck audience response from the sheer size of the performance group — a world away, perhaps, from the hilarity and high spirits of Catch Club activities, but connected through some of the key figures and by the delight in polyphonic singing.

During the 18th century it seems that sacred music of the 16th century was not the focus of the Madrigal Society or other convivial singing groups — the Noblemen’s and Gentleman’s Catch Club, and the Glee Club. But by the 1830s interest in the sacred music of William Byrd and Thomas Tallis started to exercise an irresistible attraction, particularly the legendary 40-voice motet of Tallis, Spem in alium. Though clearly an intellectual marvel, its power was not immediately evident as an auditory experience. When performed in 1836, the Tudor masterpiece was described by Samuel Wesley as music of ‘interminable monotony’, while another critic suggested that it was ‘the dead and monotonous manner of its general performance’ that was at fault. On a further performance of the work in 1849, an account mentions its ‘vastness, gloomy grandeur, and ponderous solemnity’ (Cole, 2008): a far cry from the ‘pleasant entertainment and companionship and good liquor’ which had been the incentive to membership of such convivial societies as the Madrigal Society and the Nobleman’s and Gentleman’s Catch Club.

Italian madrigals were not unknown to the Antient Concerts; for example the great Luca Marenzio is mentioned among their repertoire (Weber, 1992, 178). It would seem unlikely that the chromatically dense, inexplicable music of Prince Gesualdo of Venosa (c. 1561-1613) was heard in public performance in England until the 20th century. The evidence of a study by Percy Lovell on the Madrigal Society, however, indicates otherwise. John Immyns, founder of the Madrigal Society, who provided much of the repertoire by his copying, is said to have derived his taste for the music of Gesualdo from Dean Aldrich. ‘[Immyns] delight in the works of Gesualdo and the transmission of this delight into practice is shown by the fact that up to the end of 1750 thirteen Gesualdo madrigals had received 91 performances in meetings of the Madrigal Society’ (Lovell, 1979, 413). Few composers have exerted the fascination of Gesualdo through history. Every biographical treatment, beginning with the sensationnally titled Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa: Musician and Murderer by Gray and Heseltine (London, 1926), has apparently relished (or at least had to deal with) the fact that his fame stems largely from the scandal and violence of his biography: the murder in October 1590 and subsequent display of the bodies of his wife and her lover in retribution for her infidelity. The jealous husband’s act of violence seems at times paralleled by the uncontained anguish of his music, which does not play with emotions, like so many of the Elizabethan madrigals: it lives the passion and pain of betrayed love. No fewer than four operas on the life of Gesualdo are listed in Grove Music Online, of which the most notable composer to have attempted the subject is the Russian composer Alfred Schnittke (1995).
Despite the tumultuous events of 1590, Gesualdo moved on in succeeding years to publish six books of Madrigals, and even to re-marry in 1594. This marriage took him far from Naples to the north of Italy, where he stayed until 1596. This biographer Glenn Watkins points out that Gesualdo’s reputation as a murderer was far less a handicap to him than we might imagine’, Watkins, 1972, 39-40). This time the Prince married into the Este family of Ferrara, seat of a magnificent centre of art and architecture, and the court of Duke Alfonso II, for whom the famous Three Ladies of Ferrara, known as il Concerto delle Donne, performed as the regular evening entertainment. This consortium of expert women solo singers — exclusive performers of the new virtuosic madrigals of Duke Alfonso’s resident composer Luzzasco Luzzaschi — created a new performance style of sensuous acting and musicianship that caught the imagination of all who experienced it. One memorable description from a visitor to the court gives detailed appraisal of the innovations that enraptured the select party of listeners.

Furthermore, they moderated or increased their voices, loud or soft, heavy or light, according to the demands of the piece they were singing; now slow, breaking off with sometimes a gentle sigh, now singing long passages legato or detached, now groups, now leaps, now with long trills, now with short, and again with sweet running passages sung softly, to which sometimes one heard an echo answer unexpectedly. They accompanied the music and the sentiment with appropriate facial expressions, glances and gestures, with no awkward movements of the mouth or hands or body which might not express the feeling of the song. They made the words clear in such a way that one could hear even the last syllable of every word, which was never interrupted or suppressed by passages and other embellishments. [Vicenzo Giustiniani, Discorso sopra la musica (c. 1628), trans. Carol MacClintock (American Institute of Musicology, 1962, 69–70)

The Concerto delle Donne who also made up a consort of instruments — harp, viola, and lute — is known to have been still active while Gesualdo was in Ferrara, and Watkins pictures the composer’s ‘delight with such a rich musical environment’ (Watkins, 56). He became acquainted with Torquato Tasso, the great but emotionally unstable poet whose famous infatuation for one of the singing Ladies, Laura Peperara, caused ‘melancholy whims and suspicions of malice and persecution’. Duke Alfonso’s discussion in a letter to Gesualdo of the poet’s mental condition sheds chilling light on his style of managing creative genius:

For he [Tasso] has a strange notion that we wish to put him to death, though we have always been gracious to him and made much of him; and he ought to know that if such had been our design nothing would have been easier than to effect it.” (quoted in Watkins, 40)

Of Gesualdo’s madrigals, it may be said that they are extreme in their musical language, with cries of anguish and complex chromatic manoeuvres to disorientate both performer and listener, even those familiar with the harmonic and expressive language of Monteverdi. No lesser a composer than Igor Stravinsky penned the Preface to Watkins’ critical biography Gesualdo: the Man and his Music (1973) in which he tells the story of his own Gesualdo pilgrimage in 1956 to Ferrara, Modena, and the composer’s ‘measly castle’ near Naples. Stravinsky began with these words: ‘Musicians may yet save Gesualdo from musicologists...Even now he is academically unrespectable, still the crank of chromaticism, still rarely sung.’ He went on to explain why such music did not yet — at time of writing in 1968 — achieve its potential in performance:

The chief obstacle to the recovery of performance style is pecuniary. In a few hours’ leave of absence from a bread-winning routine of taping television commercials and disposing of seasonal oratorios, even the most excellent singers cannot achieve the blends, the exactness of intonation, the diction and articulation that the Prince’s singers would have had to master by edict and as a result of living with the music the year round. [Stravinsky, Preface to Watkins Gesualdo, 1973]
Stravinsky’s fascination with the madrigals of Gesualdo led him to investigate contemporary thought on performance style. He discovered, for example, that the relationship between volume of singing, vibrato and precision tuning was discussed in treatises from Domenico Cerone (*El melopeo y maestro*, Naples 1613) to Padre Martini (*Essemplare ossia Saggio fondamentale pratico di Contrappunto*, Bologna, 1774-5). He quotes Padre Martini’s observation that ‘madrigals are to be sung softly’ and — a surprising insight at this late 18th century stage in the evolution of the madrigal — ‘bold dissonances were permitted in madrigals because perfect intonation was easier to achieve by a few singers than by the crowd of singers in church music’. Stravinsky makes some memorable comments of his own on Gesualdo’s music. He was as much taken by the element of rhythmic innovation as by the more obvious harmonic boldness, which Stravinsky felt was always singled out by musicologists. Offering his own perception of Gesualdo’s rhythmic angularity he writes: ‘In the virtually metreless beginning of ‘Quel ‘No’ (Se la mia morte brami, Book 6), and the lashing syncopations with the word “tormenti” in Candido e verde fiore, the [rhythmic inventions] are as revolutionary [as the harmonic inventions]’ (Stravinsky, Preface, *Gesualdo*, viii).

While Stravinsky imagined the power of Gesualdo’s madrigals, who knows if he foresaw that by the late 20th century, specialist vocal chamber groups such as Amarcord would exist to bring this music to the concert platform with subtlety and precision, delivering without compromise the fierce torment of the composer’s message?
SINGING FEAR: SINOPHOBIA AND OPERA IN 19TH CENTURY AUSTRALIA

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The Victorian gold rush resulted in an enormous influx of immigrants. Amongst the mainly British goldrushers, Chinese immigrants also flocked to the colony and established significant communities. Like other gold rush migrants, many of the Chinese people who came to Victoria in the 1850s and ’60s were political and economic refugees; some had been supporters of the failed Taipang Rebellion in 1850s China, others sought asylum from the famine and poverty of life in Qing-dynasty China. Of the 313,000 settlers who arrived in Victoria between 1851 and 1860, approximately 40,000 were from China, and, by 1861, the Chinese represented between seven and ten percent of Victoria’s total population.

Whilst White Australia’s attitude towards these Chinese immigrants varied according to time, place and individual, general opinion and policy was hostile and grew increasingly so as the century wore on. Indeed, sinophobia and ‘Yellow Peril’ hysteria reached their apex in the late 19th century, despite the fact that by the 1880s Victoria’s Chinese population had dramatically reduced and the vast majority of Australia’s ethnically Chinese population, many of whom had been born in Australia, had adopted Western habits, religion, dress, and spouses.

Music, and particularly opera, was a common feature of the discourse surrounding Australia’s ‘Chinese Question’, for music was an important means by which an ethnic group could situate itself within the social hierarchy. Anne Doggett has argued that racial discrimination was evident in song, particularly in the songs of the goldfields and the black-faced minstrel ballads, and studies by Harold Love and Wang Zheng-Ting support her assertions. Popular music genres were, sadly, not unique in this regard, however. Opera was another cultural space in which Chinese people were demonised.

Chinese opera was one of the few public examples of Chinese culture regularly on display to European Australians during the 19th century. It was also one of the few aspects of Chinese culture discussed by the Western press. Peking opera was, therefore, a sort of ambassador for the Chinese people in Melbourne, and the largely negative reception it found amongst Anglo-Australians had repercussions that are difficult to overestimate. In their dismissive, and occasionally hostile, reviews of Chinese opera, the Anglo-Saxon press contributed to the sinophobia of the colony.
Yet, hostile receptions and reviews were not the only ways in which Chinese culture, and therefore the Chinese people, were ridiculed and ‘othered’. As the popularity of yellow-faced minstrelsy in 19th century Australia attests, Chinese music was often disparaged in Western art forms. Less documented, but just as powerful, is the history of how Western opera singers parodied and mocked Chinese opera, and how these performances, and the positive reception they received from the audiences that patronised them, perpetuated White Australia’s sinophobia.

One of the first Western artists to caricature Chinese Opera was Anna Bishop (wife of Sir Henry Bishop, composer of Home, Sweet Home) who was amongst the most prolific and important of gold-rush Melbourne’s operatic performers. Bishop’s Melbourne sojourn was an interesting part of Melbourne’s cultural development. Bishop was revered as an opera diva whose very presence was thought to have alchemically transformed Melbourne’s opera scene. She was (falsely) credited with establishing grand opera in Melbourne, and was believed to have endowed the city’s high-art musical culture with a sense of legitimacy.

Bishop, however, did not confine herself to ‘high-art’. She created and performed works that combined opera with elements of more popular musical and theatrical genres. In blurring the distinctions between high and low art, between performer and author, and between opera and theatre, Bishop and her operatic entertainments reached a diverse audience. One of Bishop’s most culturally relevant (and sinophobic) ‘operatic extravaganzas’ was Soprano Sfogato.

**SOPRANO SFOGATO**

Soprano Sfogato was a musico-theatrical work of about an hour’s duration. It was originally performed in California, whence Bishop had come, but received its first Antipodean performance at Melbourne’s Olympic Theatre on 29 June 1856. The extravaganza had a thin narrative that served to parody opera, its personalities and its excesses whilst also serving as a vehicle for Bishop’s considerable vocal talents.

It began with a potpourri-overture composed by Nicholas Bochsa, which mostly contained fragments of Linda di Chamounix (Donizetti) and Tancredi (Rossini) but also contained sizeable quotations of The Marseillaise and The Last Rose of Summer. The plot centred around the search by an impresario, Mr. Star Hunter, for a new diva. Auditions are held, and the manager and various colleagues are treated to a revolving door of divas, all played by Bishop, who assumed different guises. Amongst her staple characters were a ‘timid, English vocalist carolling Home, Sweet Home’; a Neapolitan prima donna in queenly robes and jewelled crown who delivered a recitative and cavatina by Mercadante; a German peasant girl with an appropriate folksong; an opera star from St. Petersburg performing a Russian melody; a Parisian chanteuse trilling Bochsa’s chanson Je suis la Bayadère; and, to conclude the extravaganza, Bishop would emerge as an Italian soprano with a brilliantly executed rondo-finale.

Beyond these ‘standards’, Bishop customised her extravaganza by including caricatures of non-Western cultures that were of particular relevance to her audience. In California, Bishop parodied Mexican and African-American music, whilst in Melbourne she imitated Chinese Opera (which was currently being performed by Chinese artists on the goldfields) and (to honour the recent British victory in the Crimean War) she also parodied the music of Tartarstan. Just as Bishop shifted between high-art and low-art, so she moved between parody and satire. Whilst the majority
Soprano Sfogato was firmly planted within the realm of affectionate parody, when she came to portray the Chinese and Tartary singers, Bishop’s approach was closer to the barbed-wire of satire. When representing the European characters, she bore herself with elegance and gentility; admittedly Bishop exaggerated these traits until they became postures and vanities rather than virtues, but the core representation was positive. Vocally, the European songs were presented ‘operatically’. By contrast, Bishop’s characterisation of a Chinese opera singer was steeped in the traditions of yellow-face minstrelsy and ‘low-art’. She adopted grotesque postures, made a crude imitation of both pidgin-English and Cantonese, and depicted Chinese music as mere ‘noise’, screeching and squawking her way through the ‘Chinese aria’.

It might be argued that Bishop’s decision to lampoon some ethnicities and not others was a choice of art rather than politics; after all, as a peripatetic artist, Bishop had no vested interest in Australia’s demographic profile or social culture beyond whether its cities furnished her with sufficient audiences to make her endeavor financially rewarding. Bishop may have been exploiting issues of race and belonging that were beginning to become subjects of political and social debate, but the work was not politically conceived; Bishop’s operatic extravaganza was a light hour of comedy, entertainment and music.

Yet, it is precisely because Soprano Sfogato was created as a piece of entertainment, rather than as piece of propaganda, that the work is such a good illustration of the role of opera in colonial contexts. Soprano Sfogata was an operatic caricature, amplifying the stereotype of several national musics to the point of amusement, and like all successful caricatures, it resonated with the audience’s perception of truth. Chinese Opera, Chinese music, and, by extension, the Chinese themselves, were widely regarded as unmusical, unrefined and undignified. Bishop took these ‘truths’ to ridiculous ends, and created a popular work of art. In doing so, she perpetuated the racist perceptions of Melbourne’s European population.


THE CHINESE QUESTION

Twenty years later, similar notions of the inherent unmusicality and unartistic nature of Chinese lyric culture were still being repeated in Melbourne’s theatres, but now allegations of these cultural shortcomings were accompanied by charges of primitivism, immorality and incompetence. The Chinese Question was a farce originally written in San Francisco, a city with which Melbourne had long cultural and demographic ties, but it spoke just as well to the racial, social and cultural politics of 1870s Melbourne; indeed, The Argus admitted that, although of Californian origin, the play was equally ‘descriptive of what is true in this city’. The production was mounted by J.C. Williamson’s theatre company at the Theatre Royal, starring Williamson himself (who would later become Australia’s most successful operatic impresario) and his wife Maggie Moore.

The plot of the play centred around an old gentleman, Mr. Freewill, who is a self-described and unabashed sinophile. Against the advice and wishes of his family he sacks his Irish-born domestic servants with the intent of replacing them with Chinese helpers. Wishing to put an end to the old man’s ‘Chinese Mania’, his family hatches a plan. They hire two Irish servants, Billy and Kitty (Williamson and Moore) and request them to disguise themselves as Chinese people, instructing them to adopt stereotypical Chinese behaviours which would ‘disgust him forever with the whole Chinese race’. The family’s attempt is successful; the play ends with Freewill declaring his ‘complete renunciation of all sympathy for China and the Chinese forever after’.

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Williamson and Moore adopted the typical behaviours and stereotypes of 19th century yellow-face minstrelsy in this project and fused them together with traditional English farce to misrepresent Chinese behaviours, culture and customs for comic effect. Hence, the Irish-cum-Chinese characters were given nonsense names: Billy became Kah Funga Tee Yung Slim whilst Kitty became Sam See Loo. The Chinese are represented as uncouth, clumsy and stupid: they are dirty, they drop plates, they’re seemingly unable to execute even the most menial of household chores, and their poor command of English is compounded by the exaggerated and stereotyped fake Chinese accents Williamson and Moore assumed in their roles.

One of their most potent weapons, however, was music. The Argus reports that Williamson and Moore ‘play[ed] upon ear-piercing instruments’ and ‘sung until [the old man] stamps his feet with rage and distraction’.14 Williamson and Moore’s musical representations were advertised as genuine ‘Vocal and Instrumental selections from a favourite Chinese Opera’.15 Such a claim added legitimacy to the depiction of Chinese people and culture that was conveyed throughout the play. The claim, however, was false. Moore’s Chinese song and dance ‘Ping-a-ling-a, ching ching, chow chow chong’ (see Figure 1), was written and composed by Charles Schultz, a minor composer of vaudeville songs in Melbourne. Schultz’s work sets a nonsensical string of syllables to a rhythmically simple, very repetitive melody consisting of five notes either in step or octave leap. This melody is underpinned by a homophonic, and at times monophonic, accompaniment which uses only two chords (I, IV and V) (Vd), and a dominant pedal imitating a drone. Both musically and linguistically, the whole song and dance is an exercise in pejorative imitation, designed to make the Chinese culture seem backward, primitive, ugly and ungraceful.

When combined with the pidgin English, the babbling lampoon of the Cantonese language, the unflattering costumes, the taped-back eyes (see Figure 2), and Williamson and Moore’s intentionally ugly singing and unmelodious plucking, Schultz’s puerile ‘Chinese song’ served not only to disparage Chinese culture, but also to infantilise the Chinese people, and make them seem undesirable, worthless, and alien to European society.

Such depictions were contrasted against the sympathetic depictions of the European characters, which were facilitated by the wit of their dialogues and the popular Irish and English ballads they were given to sing. The most important among these British songs was Poole’s No Irish Need Apply (1862), which not only framed the narrative well, but also elicited the sympathy of the audience. The musical juxtaposition between popular British ballads that engendered familiarity and the denigratory pseudo-Chinese songs that prompted ridicule and contempt symbolise the entire message of the farce.
The work’s success may be judged from the critical and popular support it received, and the level of elite patronage it garnered. Upon its première, *The Argus* reported that ‘the house was crowded and laughed more than the conventional “roar of laughter”’. The Governor of Victoria, Sir James McCulloch, and the eminent barrister and judge, Sir Redmond Barry (originally from Ireland) attended the farce more than once. *The Chinese Question* attracted uniformly positive attention from the Melbourne press, and became a popular work in the company’s repertory for the next twenty years. The moral of the story, that the old man learned his lesson and would from now on do the right thing and support white immigration and employment, was very topical in many parts of the Anglo-world at that time, especially in an Australia limping towards federation and desiring a cohesive identity.

Far from being a decadent entertainment, opera was a contested (and contentious) cultural space in colonial Australia, one in which the Chinese could be both proven inferior to British people and confirmed as a threat to them. The evidence of Chinese ‘inferiority’ furnished by works such as *Soprano Sfogato* or *The Chinese Question* fuelled the increasingly paranoid political debate about Asian immigration, a debate that eventually led to racist legislation like the White Australia immigration policy and a xenophobic culture that has persisted into the 21st century.

**ENDNOTES**

7. Je suis la *Bayadère* was composed for Bishop by Nicholas Bochsa. It is about a ‘*Bayadère*’, or Indian nautch girl. The text reads: Je suis la *Bayadère* dont le gai tambourin / en cercle près de moi. [I am a nautch girl, who merry tambourine and light dancing banish sorrow. On the shores of the Ganges, pleasure is my [only] law, come and arrange yourself in a circle close to me.]
8. ‘*Coppin’s Olympic*’, *The Argus*, May 30th, 1854, p. 5.
9. ‘The most protean aspect of comedy is its potentiality for transcending itself, for responding to the conditions of tragedy by laughing in the darkness.’ – Harry Levin
11. ‘Theatre Royal – Mr. and Mrs. Williamson in a new piece’, *The Argus*, November 24th 1874, p. 6
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
16. The next year, Schultz composed another song for Moore. ‘When the Stars begin to Peep’, was written for Maggie Moore’s 1875 Farewell concert. See Amusements – a Maggie Moore’s Farewell Concert’, *The Argus*, August 5th 1875, p. 8.
17. *Theatre Royal – Mr. and Mrs. Williamson in a new piece*, The Argus, November 24th 1874, p. 6
18. Moore was still performing the work, to popular and critical acclaim in 1893, when she took the work on tour to New Zealand. See *The Lorgnette*, *The Observer*, Volume XI, Issue 751, 28 May 1893, p. 1.
LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN HISTORY: DEVOTION, LUST, DESPAIR AND BETRAYAL

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LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN HISTORY: DEVOTION, LUST, DESPAIR AND BETRAYAL

Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt
Weiß, was ich leide!
Only one who knows longing
Knows what I suffer!
[trans. Lawrence Snyder]
Written by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) and set to music by Schubert in the 19th century, this passage introduces us to the idea that the emotions of those in love are perhaps universal and unchanging. Are they? Can we recognise in the past centuries the ideas of love, and love in marriage, that absorb and excite us today?

Renaissance madrigals and folk songs from the 16th to the 20th centuries expose the artistic representations of longing, love and desire. Is it possible for modern audiences to recognise in this music and lyrics the ideas of love, marriage and devotion that have been captured in the lines of our sources? From initial longing, to expressions of devotion, combined with the potential for despair, history is littered with the lives of men and women whose love has been recorded. The program from Amarcord, The Singing Club – Four Centuries of Song, explores the ideas and feelings associated with romantic love and longing in history, and through it we can see, and hear, for ourselves the way music holds our thoughts and feelings on love.

Madrigals are a form of musical expression which embraces these themes. In the Western world we now spend so much of our time trying to understand love; in songs, in fiction, in psychological interpretations of relationships, and especially in the self-help book. But trying to understand love is not new. Plato’s Symposium explores the many different types and meanings of love in the 4th century BC. Valerius Maximus wrote on Conjugal Love in the 1st century AD in Facta et Dicta Memorabilia (‘Memorable Doings and Sayings’), while the Church Fathers, including St John Chrysostom, St Jerome and St Ambrose, recurrently wrote about love and marriage in early medieval Europe. Many of the madrigals and songs that modern concert audiences listen to were also written to explore the ideas and feelings associated with romantic love and longing.

Madrigals flourished in the early 16th century, initially developing in Italy. In these early decades, madrigals were a mostly serious form of music. In fact, it was the courtly love poetry of the great Petrarch, who is often referred to as the founder of humanism (which stressed the value of literature, art and history),
EXPLORING THE IDEAS AND CONCEPTS THIS MUSIC AROUSES IN US BY LOOKING AT LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN THE PAST ADDS TO OUR ENJOYMENT OF IT

whose highly prized literary works were set to music. But by the mid-16th century the form of the madrigal was becoming looser, and it was these experiments with different and lighter verses which developed a different form of madrigal. By the mid-16th century, the madrigal’s emphasis on secular topics, the light-hearted take on ideas which often included pastoral and bucolic imagery — as well as amorous pursuits — found increasing popularity across Europe. In England it was the lighter madrigal which found favour towards the end of the 16th century. Significantly, music historians have viewed composers as choosing poetry that was more emotional to set to the music. It is not just the lyric poetry that composers chose to set to music which suggests there was a new emphasis on heightened emotions in the madrigal. Music scholars argue that the changes in the way the music itself was constructed in the mid-16th century aroused more emotions in the listener. Denis Arnold and Emma Wakelin have described the mid-16th century compositions of Cipriano de Rore, one of the most celebrated and influential composers of the madrigal, in this way:

Almost every significant word seems to suggest a corresponding image in sound. Minor intervals express sadder emotions, major ones joy; ascending notes symbolize such words as ‘heaven’, low registers ‘earth’. Rore uses dissonance and wide, jagged leaps to express pain or struggle...The second section of his madrigal Mia benigna Fortuna became a classic and much-imitated example of such music: it opens with a ‘forbidden’ ascending major 6th, its relentless dissonant suspensions ‘cruel, bitter, inexorable death’ of the text.3

Here we have a form of music that expresses emotion both in its lyrics and the way the music is crafted with liveliness, as well as in its rhythm and range. We can explore some of the ideas of love and marriage that are tied to this music. From Alfonso d’Avalos’ 16th century verse on the suffering he feels on leaving the one he loves, to the English poet Edmund William Gosse’s translation of the Greek text, After Many a Dusty Mile, set to the music of Elgar, audiences are exposed to artistic representations of love and desire over the centuries. For that reason, exploring the ideas and concepts this music arouses in us by looking at love and marriage in the past adds to our enjoyment of it.

What can we make of emotions in the past and emotions in the present? Questions around issues of romantic love and emotional bonds between men and women take us to the core of the past. How recognisable are people from previous centuries? Would we understand what they mean by love, but equally, would they understand what we mean by love today? Are we, in fact, talking a different language? Some of the music of these centuries suggests that there are points of connection between the language of love in the past and today. In the 16th century Alfonso d’Avalos wrote about anguish, love and suffering in a way that resonates with us:

_Sento che nel partire Il cor giunge al morire._
_Ond’io, misero ognor, ogni momento Grido ‘morir mi sento’_ 
_Non sperando di far a voi ritorno._
_E così, dico mille volte il giorno ‘Partir io non vorrei’_ 
_If by leaving I increase my suffering._

(Trans. Susannah Howe)
Equally, we might also need to ask what role biology plays in these emotions. Some historians such as Linda Pollock have argued that we should take the fundamental aspects of grief, love and emotion as given in the historical experience. The question we then confront is how individuals and society expressed these emotions and their ideas about love. Music, both in the notes and sounds that are written but also in the lyrics that accompany them, is a record of this. It is, however, equally important to understand that ideas of romantic love and marriage are changeable. That is, what we perceive today as the core rationale for marriage was not necessarily spoken of. Exploring the history of marriage in its European context, particularly focusing on medieval Europe, can lead us through the ways romantic love has been perceived.

Marriage was a contract made before God. As the Church gained authority and power from the early middle to the later middle ages, it assumed more control over the prerogative of marriage and, as a result, divorce, which had been permitted in Roman and early Germanic law as well as in early Christian law in the 7th and 8th centuries, came to an end. Early Christian society therefore underwent a change in terms of what was seen as permissible in the marriage state.

What made a marriage lawful? Marriage was contracted by two people exchanging vows. The Church did not insist on a formal, established ceremony to accompany a marriage and nor did a marriage have to take place inside a Church. Provided two people declared to each other that they considered themselves married, and they then cohabited, such marriages were seen as binding in the eyes of the Church and the wider community. While having witnesses made it easier for a husband and wife to later declare the truth of what had occurred, as long as both the man and the woman swore that they had declared themselves married, the Church was forced to accept this. Margery Paston for example, in 1469, was able to confirm that she believed the secret vows she had made to the family bailiff, Richard Calle, were binding — and since she could not be pressured into recanting this, her family, the Bishop of Norwich, and the Church were forced to accept the vows Margery and Richard had made to each other.

The marriage of Margery and Richard is often discussed in terms of romantic love. Partly because it is, if not unique, then unusual in emphasising personal affection, desire and the importance two people attached to being married to someone with whom they shared a personal love. It actually suggests
the distance between the reasons for marrying that Margery seems to have had, and the way love was spoken about in other marriages. However, here we need to be aware of the importance of the language we use: love and romantic love.

The Church itself refers to marital love in later medieval marriage sermons. Marital affection is also referred to in Canon law. However, historians point out that ‘marital affection’ was a legal term which meant respect, deference and consideration. The idea of romantic love can possibly be seen in the endearments husbands and wives used towards each other, for example in letters and also in wills, but it is not necessarily reflected in the common usage in letters and also in wills, but it is not necessarily reflected in the common usage in letters and also in wills, but it is not necessarily reflected in the common usage in letters and also in wills, but it is not necessarily reflected in the common usage of the terms ‘marital love’ and ‘marital affection’ in the medieval period. It does not necessarily mean the kind of emotional highs and lows of romantic entanglements we automatically think of today.

In fact, it is worth bearing in mind for the Church, and hence for the greater part of medieval society, ardour and passion were seen as sinful — even in a marriage. A husband and wife, although legally married, were not meant to engage in sex for enjoyment or fun, or even as an expression of romantic love for each other. The sinfulness of the act was based in its association with the sin of temptation. It diverted you from leading the clean and pure life which the Church Fathers saw as the highest goal for all men and women — even when it was acknowledged that few people would be able to follow the rigours of a chaste life. While marriage itself was acknowledged as being necessary to contain men and women’s desire within a legal state, it did not mean that Lust, one of the 7 Deadly Sins, could be disregarded.

Of course, the literature written in the medieval period contradicts this view and it is possible to see that men and women were alive to the possibilities of romantic entanglements, desire and sexual activity, legitimate and otherwise. Here we can consider the stories of Chaucer in The Canterbury Tales, Boccaccio’s Decameron and even Dante’s Inferno — which in exploring adultery and romantic love drew even greater attention to it as part of human nature.

**ARDOUR AND PASSION WERE SEEN AS SINFUL — EVEN IN A MARRIAGE**

However, it was not just the medieval Church that viewed romantic love between married couples as somehow inappropriate and unseemly. It is worth thinking of Plutarch’s Life of Cato the Elder, in which he talks about the Roman distaste for expressions of romantic love and affection between married couples. Plutarch writes:

> Cato expelled another senator who was thought to have good prospects for the consulship, namely, Manilius, because he embraced his wife in open day before the eyes of his daughter. For his own part, he said, he never embraced his wife unless it thundered loudly; and it was a pleasantry of his to remark that he was a happy man when it thundered. Here, it is the combination of affection — and the display of affection — which is subject to cultural and social understandings of what is acceptable and unacceptable.

What though, of the breakdown of marriage? By the medieval period, divorce as we know it was forbidden. However, there were provisions within the medieval Church for separation a mensa et thoro, literally separation ‘from board and bed.’ In essence it meant a husband and wife did not have to live together as a married couple under certain circumstances, usually because of fornication, but also cruelly, or if one partner was a heretic. However, both parties were forbidden to remarry until their spouse died. Such allowances are far removed from divorce as we now view it.

Yet as we know from the lives of medieval people, marriage was not static and irreversible. The Church granted annulments on certain grounds, and sometimes on the flimsiest of excuses, based on the argument that the marriage had never been valid, for example if the two people were too closely related, if one was already married, if the husband was impotent, or if it had been a forced marriage. The marriage of Eleanor of Aquitaine and her then husband the dauphin Louis, later Louis VII, was annulled on the grounds of consanguinity in 1152. Eleanor and Louis were 4th cousins, yet this annulment came after she had borne Louis two daughters.
Annulments, like marriage itself, when land and political power were involved, were treated in a particular way both by society and by the Church.

It is perhaps in the marriages of Henry VIII that we see the use, the consequences and the staggering power of annulment and love in marriage to most stunning effect. If history is littered with the lives of men and women whose love has left its mark on the pages of history, along with their despair and their betrayal, it is in Henry’s actions with Anne Boleyn that we can see all of these emotions concentrated into a period of just 10 years, from Henry’s initial infatuation with Anne in 1526 to her eventual death a decade later in 1536.

We can turn to this now, in particular by looking at Henry’s own words in the collection of love letters he wrote to Anne, seventeen of which survive today in the Vatican Library. These love letters were written over a period of about 18 months, between May 1527 and 1528. Only Henry’s letters survive and there is no record of Anne’s replies. Some are quite beautiful, some betray the arrogance of a king, some are about politics of which Anne was herself a part, and some are short and to the point in trying to arrange meetings with her. One of the first in the chronology of surviving letters is from May 1527.

Henry writes:

On turning over in my mind the contents of your last letters, I have put myself into great agony, not knowing how to interpret them, whether to my disadvantage, as you show in some places, or to my advantage, as I understand them in some others, beseeching you earnestly to let me know expressly your whole mind as to the love between us two. It is absolutely necessary for me to obtain this answer, having been for above a whole year stricken with the dart of love, and not yet sure whether I shall fail of finding a place in your heart and affection.10

Here, Henry’s uncertainty and his agony of not knowing what the woman he loves is thinking is clear. He not only feels this but expresses it to Anne in a letter, a form of communication which Henry himself appears to have loathed. His contemporaries reported that he never enjoyed writing or reading correspondence, reportedly impatient with dealing with all letters and detested writing to others in his own hand. In fact, the letters to Anne appear to be the only single piece of sustained correspondence written by his own hand which Henry ever entered into.11 In the Middle Ages letter writing was not a simple medium, or even a private medium. Letters could be, and were, intercepted, as were these letters which were eventually stolen, probably by a Papal Embassy, explaining how they ended up in the Vatican archives. Henry’s fear of interception and fear of the public knowledge of his relationship can be seen in what he writes. Yet, he did continue to write.

**THE PAIN OF ABSENCE IS ALREADY TOO GREAT FOR ME**

In a later letter, he turns to a theme of absence and longing to be with the woman he loves:

...so is it with our love, for by absence we are kept a distance from one another, and yet it retains its fervour, at least on my side; I hope the like on yours, assuring you that on my part the pain of absence is already too great for me; and when I think of the increase of that which I am forced to suffer, it would be almost intolerable, but for the firm hope I have of your unchangeable affection for me: and to remind you of this sometimes, and seeing that I cannot be personally present with you, I now send you the nearest thing I can to that, namely, my picture set in a bracelet, with the whole of the device, which you already know, wishing myself in their place, if it should please you.12
These letters resonate with emotions, and with the familiar idea of sending a token of love, in this case a bracelet with Henry’s portrait. This passage, and our inevitable knowledge of what would happen to Henry and Anne, reveals perfectly the themes Amarcord have been exploring in their program of music: devotion, lust, despair and betrayal.

The emotions we can see in this music, and in history, have ranged from the familiar and the recognisable to the strange and unfamiliar. The idea that love was not seemly in marriage, and that affection should not be displayed between husbands and wives, strikes us now as strange and perhaps even unnatural. However, I think that perhaps we need to think back to the Greek god Proteus who kept changing his form: in the end this may be what the Renaissance madrigals, the letters of Henry VIII and the brief glimpses into marriage customs in the classical world and the medieval world show us — that the form of love may change but these fleeting and transient emotions which have left their traces in music and letters are, on the whole, recognisable and familiar to us today.

THE FORM OF LOVE MAY CHANGE BUT THESE FLEETING AND TRANSIENT EMOTIONS WHICH HAVE LEFT THEIR TRACES IN MUSIC AND LETTERS ARE, ON THE WHOLE, RECOGNISABLE AND FAMILIAR TO US TODAY
THE ASPIRANT BODY: LOVE, DEATH AND SONG

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Human bodies are standing together to sing. They breathe in together, hold that breath for a moment, then breathe out in words, sounds and harmonies. All choral singing is miraculous in a way, in its capacity to transform the fluffs and stumbles of daily language and speech, the hesitant ums and ah of our imperfect conversations, into communally agreed sounds and controlled harmonies. Bodies and minds work together, weaving complex narrative, lyric and harmonic structures with the entwined, twisted strands of human voices, working and breathing together. In a capella singing, all this takes place on the high wire, as it were, without the safety net of strings, reeds, pipes and drums. Without that supportive infrastructure, without those complex resonating instruments, we hear the sound of the human breath floating in between and amongst the musicians, at once both ethereal and pneumatic. There is something thrilling about such vulnerability, even when the singers are confident and the music they make is rich and full.

When these songs and voices come from the past, there is the further mystery of the emotions that seem to cross the centuries and speak to us. It is the easiest thing to say that music and poetry are timeless; that we can 'feel' or 'live' the unchanging emotions of the past. We often say this of the drama of Shakespeare or the poetry of Chaucer, for example, that they are timeless, when what we really mean is that we think they are wonderful — and are slightly surprised at finding them so. We tend to use timelessness — the capacity of emotional expression to remain meaningful across the centuries — as an uncritical measure of greatness. Not all the emotions or historical contexts make this transition securely, however, to the formality of our recital halls. We can never take it for granted that we can reach back into the past and revive every emotion and feeling, or that the forms and styles in which we sing the music of the past can capture their original social contexts. Nevertheless, there is something about hearing the human voice singing that helps create the illusion that these historical emotions are right here in the room with us.

In the program of music from Amarcord, Tales of Love and Murder, the meanings of some of these songs and poems are deeply historical, particularly those that are contingent on medieval and renaissance conventions of romantic love. They are 'tales,' but the narrative...
function here is usually subordinated to the lyric, where the story is less important than the possibility of capturing a moment’s feeling, or contradiction in feeling.

Carlo Gesualdo’s Io tacerò (I will remain silent) evokes the medieval courtly idea of aristocratic love (amour courtois) as pain, suffering and joy; the woman is both tormenter and physician (both wound and salve). In the beautiful contradictions of love poetry, though, the greatest amorous suffering produces the greatest poetry, while the best poets and songwriters speak most eloquently about their silence.

Io tacerò, ma nel silenzio mio
La lagrime i sospiri
Diranno i miei martiri.

I will keep quiet, yet in my silence
My tears and sighs
Shall tell of my pain.

Gesualdo was not just a poet and composer, however. Born into a noble family in 1566, he married his cousin Maria d’Avalos; but when he discovered her affair with the Duke of Andria, he stabbed them both and fled to northern Italy. Such an extreme act puts pressure on the idea of easy identification with the poetic conventions of the Renaissance.

Those conventions admit of endless reiteration. The short lyric by Nicolas Gombert (c. 1495-c. 1556), Triste départ, explores the sensibility of the lover. In these poems, the emotional life of the male singer/poet is of central concern:

Triste départ m’avait mis en douleur,
Mon corps était plus froid qui n’est le marbre.
Transi de deuil et séchant comme un arbre,
Ma face avait perdu toute couleur.

Our sad parting caused me such grief.
My body was colder than marble;
Numbed by sorrow and unfeeling as a tree,
My face was drained of all its colour.

(trans. Christopher Abbey)

These are poems and songs written in the high style, a style that loves the detailed exploration of extravagant feeling, its effects on the body and its capacity to generate the most affecting flights of rhetoric. This poetry is aspirational, written by musicians and poets to express a sensibility that is associated with aristocratic feeling, in songs that a noble patron might himself want to sing, or have sung on his behalf.

But love and desire can also be coded in a more popular, or earthy vein. Like the courtly lovers, the singer in Jean-Antoine de Baïf’s Une puce j’ay dedans l’oreille (I have a flea in my ear) is consumed with love, but it is love in the form of a desire, a physical itch. His desire is like a sickness, but he appeals to the old sorceress to heal him with a potion.

Heinrich Marschner’s Liebeserklärung is sung by the tailor’s apprentice to his beloved, expressing love in suitably sartorial terms: ‘Let me sew a large buttonhole in your feelings... Let me stand at your side as a slender tailor’s rule... O be my winter coat, the moss upon my window.’

Orlando di Lasso’s Matona mia cara sets out more deliberately to rewrite the high courtly mode. It begins with the old idea of the troubadour, singing a seductive song under the woman’s window. But the song quickly moves into another register, avoiding the elevated language of Gesualdo or Gombert.

Se mi non saper dire tante belle rason
Petrarca mi non saper, ne fonte d’Helicon
Don don don diridiridon don don don

Love and desire in this song are appetitive and animalistic. ‘I’m as fond of you as a Greek is of a capon!’ ‘I’ll bring you a woodcock, as fat as a kidney,’ ‘I’ll fuck (mi ficcar) all night long, I will thrust like a ram.’
Orlando’s lyrics are deliberately shocking, but their verbal sense cheerfully disintegrates at the end of each verse into the nonsense refrain: ‘Don don don diridiridir don don don.’ These are the wordless syllables, the nonsense scatting or non-lexical sounds that hold so many of our songs together, either written into the refrain like this one, or in the melodies and arias that are strung out over long musical phrases. The Queen of the Night’s famous aria in Mozart’s Magic Flute is an extreme, and familiar, example.

There is something about these scripted ‘nonsense’ syllables that gets to the heart of what it is to sing, to make sound, music, without narrative sense. It is the playful nonsense of a jazz singer scatting between verses, improvising around the tune and the words. It is also the contemporary fun of beatboxing, producing sound effects, the human voice mimicking other instruments and effects.

In the realm of popular song, these wordless syllables often appear in songs that are designed to accompany the repetitive rhythms of work, or walking or marching. We hear them in the defiantly cheerful Scaramella va alla guerra [Scaramella is off to war] by Josquin des Prez. This sounds as if it derives from or is composed as a kind of game song. Scaramella, also known as Scaramouche, is a stock figure of early comedies. He is usually a dandy and braggart, though in truth he is often cowardly. There is little narrative context to this song, which is structured around the lists of things Scaramella must take with him (his lance, buckler, boots and shoes) and around its ridiculous refrain, ‘La zombero boro bormetta, lo boro bormbo.’

We find a similar pattern of nonsense refrains in the boisterous songs that call the young men together to celebrate their own gaiety, like Baldasserr Donato’s Chi la Gagliarda, with its refrain of ‘Tan tan tan tan tarira, tan tan tan tarira, tirarira,’ or the several drinking songs that are such fun to sing and perform.

But Amarcord’s program is called Tales of Love and Murder, and it includes the more dramatic Fatal la parte, by Juan del Encina. This is the story of Cotal, who (much like Gesualdo) killed his lover after finding her alone in his house with a Spaniard. As in fiction, and in the novel, adultery always makes good material for narrative and song — or gossip. Pierre Certon [1500-1572] makes a great play with the desire to tell stories, in La la la, je ne l’ose dire [La la la, I dare not say]. This song tells the story of a jealous man who is indeed being cuckolded, but the story proceeds only slowly, piecemeal, while the singer interrupts himself, ‘La la la, je ne l’ose dire, La la la, je le vous dirai!’ [La la la, I can’t tell, I’ll tell you!]. This is like the paradox of the lover’s suffering that is so great it cannot be told — except in the song he will now sing for us.

There is also a much darker, gothic side to this recital, especially in some of the 18th and 19th century songs.

Franz Schubert set Friedrich von Matthisson’s poem Der Geistertanz [Spirit Dance] to music in 1816. In this song the spirits dance gleefully around the graves, as the ravens fly up and around the walls of the deserted abbey.

Even darker is the song that follows, Felix Mendelssohn’s setting of Goethe’s song of the werewolves, Zigeunerlied. The song begins in the wild woods, in winter, and we hear the howl of wolves and owls, the black cat of Anna the witch, and see the mysterious visitation of the seven women werewolves.

They shook themselves, they gave a shake, and ran howling away. Wille wau wau wau! Wille wo wow o! Wito hul! Wow o wo witu Hul!

This last refrain, the song of the werewolves, is one of the most dramatic iterations of the wordless refrains. It reminds us that the line that separates us from the non-human (whether that is the animal or the ghostly non-human) is not always a rigid or stable one, that our finely developed lyrics and vocabulary can quickly fade into breath articulated over syllables that bear no relation to poetry and narrative.
All these songs, whether they express the refined and delicate sensibility of the courtly lover’s suffering, or the ghostly howling of werewolves, are performed through the human breath, and in the wonderful renditions of Amarcord, a capella, without instrument. In classical tradition, this style of singing has its origins in church devotional music, where the choir sings, as it were, on behalf of the congregation, leading them in vocal worship. It is a style of great precision, but also great empathy, a style that calls both for tremendous discipline, and a strong sense of community, of bodies breathing together.

I have a teenage son who sings in a small vocal group for his school. They sing a mixture of jazz and contemporary music, and much of it is a capella. Sometimes they sing under their conductor, but I’ve also sat many times and watched as these seven young people, five girls and two boys, stand alone on a dark stage, often dressed in simple blacks and greys, with just their pale faces lit up. They take their notes from the piano or a tuner, and stand for a moment before they sing. My son described the process of learning to breathe together. They align their breathing until they are ready to begin the first combined expiration of breath across the vocal chords, and then the rehearsed patterns, rhythms and melodies take over and pick up that momentum.

When I first heard my son sing a two-line solo — it was James Taylor’s That Lonesome Road — I was sitting in a church next to my husband and my parents. A small row of people collectively holding their breath as the sound rang up and out into the church’s wooden rafters. There is something both terrible and wonderful about hearing the child of your body sing. Certainly there is a similar anxiety when they do an exam, or have to speak or play an instrument in public. Your heart is in your mouth, and you want to hold them up and stand by them as they talk, or perform, whatever it is. And I am sure all parents, not just birth mothers, feel this. But when young people sing, there is something...not visceral, but aspirant, about it. There is something about the vulnerability of a young person singing, drawing in their breath with all the mysterious movements of bodily organs, muscles and bones, all still growing, and moving all the tiny muscles in the face and throat to make sounds and channel the air into music, that simply takes the breath away. Perhaps it recalls something about the exchange of breath, when the child is first born: that moment when the newly-born body begins to breathe on its own; when the mother, if she were able, would hold her breath to wait to see if it could, if she had grown lungs and heart strong enough to hold breath on their own. I know several other mothers of singers who feel this exchange of breath, whose bodies themselves become aspirant, breathing differently, when they hear their children sing.

In their strange, wordless syllables, and in their shared human breath, these songs seem to carry forth a trace of this pre-linguistic phase. I do not mean in any sense that they are childish songs; but that they reach into a different level of consciousness, a level that facilitates the cross-over between languages. Even if we do not have translations of these songs, and even if we cannot hear all the linguistic syllables accurately, we can share this human inhalation and exhalation of breath, shaped around sounds that are both language and non-language. It is no wonder that our songs are so often about love and death: the intake of breath in desire, the expiration of breath in our final moments.

**WHEN YOUNG PEOPLE SING, THERE IS SOMETHING... NOT VISCERAL, BUT ASPIRANT, ABOUT IT**

As we listen tonight, we don’t have to share that anxiety about our children performing: but we can capture this sense that an a capella group is singing both for us, and also on our behalf, celebrating that human capacity to make ordered sounds, to breathe together for us.
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