



BRIGHTON CONSORT
DIRECTOR: GREG SKIDMORE



PRIMA LE PAROLE:

La Bella Italia in words and music

Saturday

June 22nd, 2024, 7pm

St Paul's Church, West St.

Brighton

BN1 2RE

Sunday

June 23rd, 2024, 4pm

Holy Trinity Church

Hurstpierpoint

West Sussex BN6 9TT

Tickets: £12, concessions £6
under 12s free - from www.brightonconsort.org.uk
or 01273 833746 or on the door

info@brightonconsort.org.uk



Brighton Consort: registered charity no. 1096432

Prima le parole
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Brighton Consort
Greg Skidmore, Musical Director

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The beauty of the Italian language is well known. It is 'the singers' language' and sometimes considered to be 'The Language of Love'. Italy was also the birthplace of the Renaissance and even though Renaissance music was truly international, many leading composers from across the continent lived and worked in Italy, and spoke Italian. Our title means 'The words come first' and throughout the 16th century in Italy, composers and theorists argued and experimented with how exactly words and harmonies should interact. This concert will revel in the Italian language itself, with the music being either sung in Italian or inspired by Italy and Italian-ness! Interspersed with beautiful, lyrical music from Renaissance Italy will be readings in Italian (and English) about music, beauty, and la bella vita!

Programme note

Italia! The land of great food, lovely weather, amazing architecture, and the birthplace and spiritual home of so much of European culture for centuries. As singers, and as lovers of Renaissance music, we owe a great debt to the Italians. The Renaissance itself was begun here in the early 15th century, and Italy led the rest of Europe through the many advancements in all of the arts that characterise this fascinating time. Being singers, we are constantly confronted with the one defining difference between us and instrumentalists: we not only make harmonies with our voices, but also communicate using words. Blending these two things together, the Italian language itself and how it was set to music during the Renaissance, we find endless possibilities to indulge in our favourite things and by concentrating on the language, we gain a new insight into how Renaissance music can be sung, be expressive, and even be 'modern'.

Our concert tonight is dedicated to exploring the magnificent Italian language in Renaissance music. The most obvious place to start is with the madrigal, a genre of composition that developed and reached its zenith during the Renaissance. Madrigals are the descendants of simple, repetitive 15th-century secular songs called *frottolas*, more similar to what we might think of as late mediaeval folk songs, and are the ancestors of 17th and 18th century opera. The depths of psychological insight and emotional expression we find in Handel or Mozart owe more to Cipriano de Rore and Claudio Monteverdi than often is acknowledged. Coupled with our brief tour of the world of madrigals, we will concentrate on the language itself and how it sounds, as the text of each piece will be read aloud before it is sung. We also will hear poetry by the two most influential and canonical Italian poets of the late Mediaeval and Renaissance, Dante and Petrarca.

In its culturally and politically dominant position, Italy acted as a magnet for top musical talent from around the continent. Perhaps ironically, many of the musical innovations that took place in Italy actually were done by foreigners employed there. Our first piece, *Italia mia*, was written by Philippe Verdelot who was a Frenchman but spent most of his career in Italy, in Florence working for the powerful Medici family and collaborating with Machiavelli. He is sometimes referred to as the 'father' of the Italian madrigal, and was the first to gain fame by publishing this repertoire. We start our concert with *Italia mia* because it is by Verdelot, but also because the text is about Italy itself and it was authored by one of the most important Italian poets for composers of madrigals, Francesco Petrarca.

Shifting quickly from the beginning of the madrigal's journey to almost its end, our first reading is a text by the undisputed master of the genre in the 17th century, Claudio Monteverdi. As now, there was a robust culture of music criticism in 16th-century Italy and even Monteverdi was not immune, especially given his penchant for audacity and experimentalism. A famous quarrel took place in print between Monteverdi and a theorist called Giovanni Maria Artusi, from which sprung a very important phrase in the history of how words and music fit together: 'Seconda Pratica'. In three readings this evening, we will hear first from Monteverdi himself about what this phrase means and then from his brother Giulio Cesare Monteverdi who takes up his famous brother's cause and fleshes out his ideas. Monteverdi's bold innovation, here expressed in his own words and those of his brother, is that the definition of 'modern' music in the 17th century was one in which the

words were in charge, and the job of a composer was to create harmonies and rhythms that conformed to the meaning of the words. Our concert title 'Prima le parole' is related to this idea: The words come first.

Another thread winding its way through our programme tonight is how the relationship between words and music being defined in the madrigal eventually found its way into sacred composition and even to other languages other than the vernacular. We intersperse the five movements of Monteverdi's late mass setting from 1650, *Messa a quattro voci da capella*, throughout our concert to show how Monteverdi was able to modernise the genre of the mass using all of the ideas he and his contemporaries had worked out writing madrigals while still adhering to the principles laid down for a mass setting many decades, if not centuries earlier.

Madrigals were always an experimental genre, even from the very beginning. Because of the breadth of different texts used and the lack of a liturgical function to satisfy, composers found they had the room to try new musical ideas. One such early experimenter was Nicola Vicentino, a theorist and composer active in the middle of the 16th century. The second of our readings this evening is a passage from his famous treatise *L'antica musica ridotta alla moderna prattica* (Ancient music adapted to modern practice) from 1555. In this work he details many extravagant ideas about the complexity of chromatic music theory and how he saw them relating to ancient Greek music theory, only just being rediscovered. Vicentino's work on harmonic and chromatic experimentation was to influence later composers such as Carlo Gesualdo.

We continue our journey through the history of the madrigal with works by Jacques Arcadelt (*Ahimè, ahimè dov'è'l bel viso*) and Cipriano de Rore (*O sonno*). Both of these men also came from northern Europe and built their careers, and found international fame, in Italy. Both contributed enormous numbers of madrigals to the growing tradition and Rore in particular epitomised the state of the art in the middle of the 16th century. Our final madrigal of the first half is an example of one of Vicentino's brave experiments with chromaticism and bold harmonic strangeness. It is also yet another setting of a poem by Petrarca, this time published some 40 years after Arcadelt's. The continued setting of Petrarchan verse by madrigal composers throughout the 16th century is a hallmark of the genre.

The second half of our concert opens with two pieces that showcase an expansion of the madrigal genre. The *madrigale spirituale* is a sacred piece, but one that sets a vernacular text and, importantly, something not meant to be performed during a church service. Here, therefore, composers were able to treat religious themes with the same musical flair and experimentation they would otherwise reserve for setting love poetry or other secular texts. The intensity, therefore, of these settings is remarkable. Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina is most known for his perfect, shimmering, clear harmonies and unassailable Counter-Reformation certainty, but in his *Vergine chiara*, part of a much larger group of madrigals he wrote again setting Petrarchan sonnets in praise of the Virgin Mary, he indulges in a sort of contrapuntal ambiguity that reveals a human side, a subjectivity and intimacy. Lassus' *Lagrima di San Pietro* (The Tears of St Peter) madrigal cycle is considered by many to epitomise the height to which both he and Renaissance composition as a whole had risen by the end of the 16th century. The fidelity to the words and the depth and seriousness with which Lassus approaches his subject matter (the three-fold denial of Christ by Peter) is truly astonishing here. These are no trite exercises in word painting, but

display expressions of both empathy and disgust, contain careful characterisations of individual people in the story, and avoid flinching when the real horror of Peter's situation becomes clear.

As we've seen, Petrarca's poetry provided a rich seam of material for madrigalists throughout the 16th and early 17th centuries. We thought it fitting, however, given that this concert is in praise of the Italian *language* to let some of these wonderful texts speak for themselves. The three poems which will be read this evening, both in Italian and English, were famously set by Marenzio, Lassus, Giaches De Wert, and Monteverdi himself - and others - and all come from Petrarca's large collection of Italian lyrics, *Il Canzoniere*.

We finish our brief and varied tour of the world of madrigals in this evening's concert with two composers who stretched the genre as far as it could go. Gesualdo did this harmonically and Monteverdi did it by moulding madrigals into mini operas. Gesualdo is famous for his audacious and tortured harmonic style and *Asciugate i begli occhi* does not disappoint! Gesualdo is able somehow to throw notes and entries around almost at random and yet always tie them together in a recognisable cadence. This extraordinary freedom is showcased in the second part of this madrigal, in which he fixates on the words '*m'uccide*' (it kills me).

Monteverdi has featured heavily in this programme, both theoretically and in the music of his mass. However, his undisputed mastery of the madrigal necessitates that he get the last word. His *Anima mia, perdona* is an example of what Monteverdi is able to do that no other composer can. There is passion, there is dissonance, and there is expression. But Monteverdi also creates a story and leads the listener on an emotional journey. This madrigal, as with so many that Monteverdi wrote, has a progression with each section perfectly judged to lead to the next. By the end, the convoluted text has almost strangled itself but in Monteverdi's hands the result is something of wild, but intelligible anguish, deeply personal and relatable. His is not an academic experiment or an insane oddity. Monteverdi somehow understands and is able to articulate purely and with power the truth of being alive.

Programme note by Greg Skidmore
June 2024

Brighton Consort
Musical Director, Greg Skidmore

Soprano	Alto	Tenor	Bass
Anne Bonwit	Jenny Clemens	Maya Davis	Mike Clemens
Sue Clough	Eleanor Clapp †	Richard Davis	Mark Findlay
Bronwen Foster *	Belinda Dutch	Nick Jarvis	David Game
Diana Gobel	Janet Gascoine *	Paul Lane	John Petley †
Kathy Holloway	Ellie Hale	David Waterhouse	Alessio Santamaria
Hannah Loach	Stella Holman	Jan White	Nick Tier
Mirella Marlow	Alicia Newell *	Stephen White	Mick Venebles
Pamela Nickels	Liz Petty		Peter Wells *
	Susie Pontin		
	Michelle Roberts		
	Jan Thompson-Smith		

† indicates a singer who will only be present on Saturday, 22 June

* indicates a singer who will only be present on Sunday, 23 June

Prima le parole: La Bella Italia in words and music
Texts & Translations

Italia mia, ben ch'el parlar
Sia indarno a le piaghe mortali
Che nel' bel corpo tuo spesse veggio
Piacem' almen' ch' e' miei sospir' sien quali
Sper' il Tever' et l'Arno
E'l Po, dove doglioso et grave hor seggio.
Rector' del ciel', io cheggio
Che la pietà che ti conduce in terra
Ti volgha al tuo dilect' almo paese:
Vedi, Signor' cortese,
Di che levi cagion che crudel guerra
I cor', ch' indur' et serra
Marte superb' et fero
Apri tu, padr' e'ntenerisci et snoda;
Ivi fa ch'el tuo vero
Qual' io mi sia per la mia lingua s'oda.

My Italy, although speech
Does not aid those mortal wounds
Of which in your lovely body I see so many,
I wish at least my sighs to be
Such as Tiber and Arno hope for,
and Po, where I now sit sorrowful and sad.
Ruler of Heaven, I beg
That the mercy that made You come to earth
May now make You turn to Your beloved country.
See, noble Lord,
From what trivial causes comes such cruel war:
The hearts that proud fierce
Mars makes hard and closed,
Father, do You open and soften and free:
Cause Your truth (though I am unworthy)
To be heard there through my tongue.

Ahimè, ahimè, dov' è'l bel viso,

in cui solea tener suo nido Amore,
 e dove ripost' era ogni mia speme?
 dov' è'l bel viso, il bel viso
 che ornava il mondo di splendore,
 il mio caro thesoro, il sommo bene?
 chi me'l ritiene, e chi me'l cela
 o fortuna, o morte ingorda
 cieca spietata e sorda,
 chi m'ha tolto il mio cor, chi me l'asconde?
 dov' è'l ben mio, che più non mi risponde?

Alas, where's the beautiful face,
 Where Love used to have his nest,
 And where all of my hopes were?
 Where's the beautiful face, the beautiful face
 That adorned the world with magnificence,
 My dear treasure, the greatest good?
 Who's holding it from me, who's hiding it?
 Oh fate, oh greedy death
 Blind, pitiless, and deaf,
 Who took my heart from me, who's hiding it?
 Where's my darling, who's not answering me?

O sonno, o della queta, umida, ombrosa
 notte placido figlio; o de' mortali
 egri conforto, oblio dolce de' mali
 si gravi, ond' è la vita aspra e noiosa;
 soccorri al cor omai, che langu' e posa
 non have, e queste membra stanch' e frali
 solleva: a me ten vola, o sonno, e l'ali
 tue brune sovra me distendi e posa.
 Ov'è 'l silentio che'l dì fugge e'l lume
 E i lievi sogni, che con non secure
 vestigia di seguirti han per costume?
 Lasso, ch'invan te chiamo, e queste oscure
 e gelide ombre invan lusingo. O piume
 d'asprezza colme! O notti acerb' e dure!

O sleep, O, of peaceful, fresh, and shadowy
 night the quiet child; O afflicted mortals'
 comfort; sweet oblivion of ills
 so grave [they make] life harsh and tedious,
 give succour to my heart now, that languishes
 and has no repose, and these frail and weary
 limbs, raise. Fly to me, O sleep, and your dark
 wings, over me, spread and rest.
 Where is the silence which the day flees
 and the light, and the gentle dreams which
 leave no trace but usually follow on after you?
 Alas in vain I call you, and these gloomy
 and cold shadows in vain I entice: O plumes
 with harshness filled, O hard and painful nights

L'aura che 'l verde lauro et l'aureo crine

soavemente sospirando move,
 fa con sue viste leggiadrette et nove
 l'anime da' lor corpi pellegrine.
 Candida rosa nata in dure spine,
 Quando fia chi sua pari al mondo trove,
 Gloria di nostra etate? O vivo Giove,
 Manda, prego, il mio in prima che'l suo fine:
 Sì ch'io non veggia il gran publico danno,
 E il mondo rimaner senza il suo sole,
 Ne gli occhi miei, che luce altra non ànno;
 Ne l'alma, che pensar d'altro non vole,
 Ne gl'orecchi, ch'udir altro non sanno,
 Senza l'oneste sue dolci parole.

The breeze which both the green laurel and the golden hair,
 sweetly sighing, moves,
 Makes, through these images, graceful and new,
 souls to be transported as pilgrims from their bodies.
 A white rose born among hard thorns,
 when will be found in the world one similar to her,
 the glory of our time? O living Jupiter,
 I pray that you send my end before hers:
 so that I will not see the great public harm,
 the world remaining without its sun,
 my eyes with no other light,
 my soul not wishing to think of anything else,
 my ears unable to hear anything else,
 without her graceful sweet words.

Vergine chiara e stabile in eterno,
 Di questo tempestoso mare, stella,
 D'ogni fedel nocchier fidata guida;
 Pon' mente in che terribile procella,
 l'mi ritrovo, sol, senza governo,
 Ed ho già da vicin l'ultime strida.
 Ma pur in te l'anima mia si fida;
 Peccatrice, i'no'l nego,
 Vergine; ma ti prego
 Che'l tuo nemico del mio mal non rida.
 Ricorditi che fece il peccar nostro
 Prender Dio, per scamparne,
 Umana carne al tuo virginal chiostro.

Virgin bright and fixed in eternity,
 Of this tempestuous sea, the star,
 And of every faithful helmsman the faithful guide;
 Consider, in what a terrible storm
 I find myself, alone, without a steer,
 And already my last cry is near.
 But still in you my soul puts its trust;
 A sinner, I do not deny it,
 O Virgin, but I pray to you
 That your enemy at my troubles doesn't laugh.
 Remember that our sin
 Caused God to take, that we should escape it,
 Human flesh in the cloister of your virginity.

Veduto il miser quanto differente
dal primo stato suo si ritrovava,
non bastandogli il cor di star presente
a l'offeso Signor, che sì l'amava,
senz'aspettar se fiera o se clemente
sentenzia il duro tribunal gli dava,
de l'odioso albergo ov'era allora
piangendo amaramente uscì di fuori.

As soon as the wretch saw how different
from his prior state he found himself,
not having the heart to remain in the presence of
the scorned Lord, who loved him so,
without waiting [to know] whether a severe or merciful
sentence the harsh tribunal would give,
from the now-hated place where he was,
bitterly crying, he went outside.

Asciugate i begli occhi,
deh, cor mio, non piangete
se lontano da voi gir mi vedete!
Ahi, che pianger debb'io misero e sólo,
ché partendo da voi m'uccide il duòlo.

Dry those lovely eyes,
alas, my beloved, do not weep
if you see me wandering far from you.
Ah, for I must weep, in misery and alone,
because the pain of leaving you kills me.

Anima mia, perdona
a chi t'è cruda sol dove pietosa
esser non può; perdona a questa,
nei detti e nel sembiante
rigida tua nemica,
ma nel core
pietosissima amante;
e, se pur hai desio di vendicarti,
deh! qual vendetta aver puoi tu maggiore
del tuo proprio dolore?
Che se tu se' 'l cor mio,
come se' pur mal grado
del cielo e della terra,
qualor piangi e sospiri,
quelle lagrime tue sono il mio sangue,
que'sospiri il mio spirto e quelle pene
e quel dolor, che senti,
son miei, non tuoi, tormenti.

My beloved, forgive
the one who is cruel to you, only because
she cannot express pity; forgive that one
that in her words and outward appearance
is your implacable enemy
while in her heart,
is your most tender lover,
and, if you still wish to take revenge,
ah, what greater vengeance can you have
than your own suffering?
For if you are my beloved,
as you truly are, in spite
of heaven and earth,
whenever you weep and sigh,
those tears of yours are my blood,
those sighs are my life's breath, and the sorrows
and pain that you feel
are my, not your, torments.

Biographies

Brighton Consort was formed by the late Daphne Elston in 1971 and is best known for its ambitious exploration of the rich repertoire of renaissance and early baroque music. Its Musical Directors have included Deborah Roberts, Katie Thomas, James Dixon and the present director Greg Skidmore. Several choir members are also closely involved in the running of the Brighton Early Music Festival. Brighton Consort's programmes have included collaborations with Ensemble Reza, the Paul Nieman Brass Ensemble and Nick Houghton, and the choir has performed in the Voices of London Festival and at various events in the Royal Pavilion, Brighton. Although our core repertoire mainly consists of Renaissance choral music, in order to offer variety to audiences and singers alike, our programmes sometimes include contemporary pieces and items from other musical periods too.

Born in Canada, **Greg Skidmore** arrived in England as an undergraduate at Royal Holloway College, University of London. After graduating with First Class Honours in Music, his post-graduate Choral Scholarship at Wells Cathedral led him to Lay Clerkships at Gloucester Cathedral and Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford. He now lives in London and pursues a varied career as a consort, choral, and solo oratorio singer alongside work as a conductor and workshop leader. He has appeared with *The Tallis Scholars*, *The Sixteen*, *The Cardinal's Musick*, *I Fagiolini*, *Tenebrae*, *Gabrieli Consort*, *Alamire*, *Contrapunctus*, *Collegium Vocale Ghent*, *Cappella Amsterdam*, *La Grand Chapelle* (Madrid), and the *Tafelmusik Baroque Chamber Choir* (Toronto). He can be heard on recordings released by Decca, Deutsche Grammophon, Harmonia Mundi USA, and Gimell Records. In February 2022, Greg made his hundredth appearance with *The Tallis Scholars*. While at Christ Church in Oxford, he began a course of doctoral research in Musicology at the University of Oxford and started his own men's voices consort, *I Dedicati*. More recently he was appointed Musical Director of *The Lacock Scholars*, one of the UK's premier amateur vocal consorts. Greg recently completed major coaching projects with students at the University of York and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and also has worked as a freelance vocal coach and conductor at the Royal Academy of Music. He has given workshops and masterclasses in the UK, France, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia in association with *The Sixteen*, *I Fagiolini*, and on his own and he is increasingly engaged in Canada as a guest conductor, clinician, and record producer, founding *The Canadian Renaissance Music Summer Schools* in 2018. He has been published in *Early Music* and his writing has appeared in programmes and CD liner notes for *The Tallis Scholars*, *The Sixteen*, *The Cardinal's Musick*, *The Gabrieli Consort*, *Tenebrae*, and *Ex Cathedra*.

Interested in joining us?

Brighton Consort performs mainly Renaissance and early Baroque choral music but programmes sometimes include contemporary pieces and items from other musical periods too. We normally present three concert programmes per year, usually with two performances of each. We rehearse on Wednesday evenings (7:45pm-9:45pm) at St George's Church, Kemptown. Rehearsals take place throughout the year, with a break during July and August. We are always looking to hear from enthusiastic new singers in all voice parts and the best way to inquire about joining us is to get in touch. We'll ask you a little bit about your experience and suitability for what we do, but we are a welcoming and flexible bunch! We're very open to meeting new people and can't wait to hear from you.

To reach us, please email info@brightonconsort.org.uk

More Information

For more information about **Brighton Consort**, to browse through our past projects, and learn more about the choir and our musical director, please [visit our website](#):

brightonconsort.org.uk

or [email](#):

info@brightonconsort.org.uk

We can also be found on [social media](#):

facebook.com/BrightonConsort

twitter.com/BrightonConsort

Brighton Consort is also appearing at the following event:

[St Bartholomew's Brighton 150th Anniversary Series: Visiting Choir](#)

Sunday, 14th of July, 2024

Our 2024-25 season has yet to be launched. Information will be available at brightonconsort.org.uk very soon.