

PROGRAM NOTES

Tonight's program, "Faith and Madness," combines sacred music on the first half with secular music - primarily madrigals - following intermission. The composers range from the late Renaissance to the high Baroque eras, with startling contrasts in style, content, and emotional affect. The Calmus Ensemble has graciously provided a summary introduction.

Two kinds of inspiration . . .

To do art, an artist needs (beside his technical abilities) one thing: inspiration. Inspiration can come from inside and outside, from landscape, faith, love, environment, or other influences. Some years ago, we recorded a CD with the title "Madrigals of Madness," a CD with a certain presumed 'mad' connections of its songs, concerning content, historical background, or biography of a composer. In this program we combine those 'mad-rigals' (in the second part of this concert) with motets, chorales and mass movements (in the first part), written by composers that took their inspiration out of their honest and true faith in God. Palestrina as the major Catholic master of the Renaissance, and Bach and the members of the Bach family in their convinced Lutheran way of life. Remember: Bach signed "Soli Deo Gloria" under every single work he wrote!

We invite you to a concert with a big contrast - between the purity of sacred church music and the extreme moods of humans (individual or as a community) in the expressive madrigals.

- The Calmus Ensemble

* * * * *

**Kyrie and Gloria from *Missa O Admirabile Commercium*
Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (ca.1525-1594)**

[photo of Palestrina]



Giovanni Pierluigi, called Palestrina because of the town near Rome where he was likely born, was the most important composer of sacred music in the high Italian Renaissance. He served as a chorister and singer at Rome's Santa Maria Maggiore as a teenager and as organist and singer at the cathedral in Palestrina from 1544. For most of his adult career he was Maestro della Cappella Giulia at St. Peter's - the Vatican Chapel - in Rome. In that capacity he was enormously influential, serving during the Council of Trent. Effectively that made him the musical leader of Italy's Counter-Reformation.

Palestrina composed more than 100 Masses, 65 hymns in four to six voices, 68 offertories for five voices, and more than 100 sacred and secular madrigals. This evening's first half opens and closes with sections from his *Missa O Admirabile Commercium*, a five voice mass [SATTB]. Its theme, in mixolydian mode (like the white keys of the piano from G to g, with F-natural instead of F-sharp) is based on Palestrina's Motet "O Admirabile Commercium," composed in 1569. The motet is a Christmas antiphon. Palestrina's eponymous Mass may date from the same year; it was published in Venice in 1599.

His music is characterized by flawless counterpoint, balance among voices, and transcendent beauty: what Dennis Schrock has described as "imitative polyphony in its most idealized state, with balanced melodic shapes, consistently prepared and resolved dissonances, and structural symmetry."

Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied, SWV196

Psalm 96 from the Becker Psalter

Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672)

[photo of Schütz"]



Born near Dresden, Schütz grew up in Weissenfels. At age 13 he was recruited for the chapel chorus of Landgraf Moritz, a wealthy German arts patron. Schütz studied law in his early 20s, but reverted to music when Moritz sponsored him to study in Venice with Giovanni Gabrieli. Under Gabrieli's tutelage, he mastered the Italian style. After his return to Germany, he spent more than 40 years in service to Johann Georg, the Elector of Saxony, whose Dresden court boasted one of Germany's finest musical establishments.

The 30 Years War (1618-1648) was damaging to many German states' economies. Schütz returned to Venice in the late 1620s to study with Claudio Monteverdi, then served in several positions in Northern Germany and in Denmark. In his early 70s, the new Elector of Saxony granted him *Kapellmeister* emeritus status, which effectively secured his retirement. He lived to the remarkable age of 87.

Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied is taken from Schütz's Becker Psalter settings. Cornelius Becker was a Leipzig theologian. His paraphrases of Psalm texts in metrical German appeared in 1602. Schütz turned his attention to them in the 1620s. His collection of motets initially appeared in 1628; he enlarged and revised the collection in 1661. The title page says *Nach gemeinen contrapunctus Art* - 'in the ordinary contrapuntal style,' meaning simple and straightforward.

Schütz's four-part setting of Psalm 96 ["O Sing to the Lord a New Song"] is indeed transparent and simple, almost like folk music. His writing reflects both the serenity and balance of the high Renaissance, and the more flexible expressivity of the early Baroque.

Like Schütz's other Psalms from the Becker Psalter, this would have been written for the choir boys singing morning and evening services. That stated, he sought wide usage in churches, schools, and domestic environments, which accounts for the comparative ease of performance in his Becker settings. Saxony's prelates adopted Schütz's Psalter as the duchy's official Psalter in 1661, but it was soon displaced by competitive anthologies.

Fürchte dich nicht

Motet for five voices

Johann Christoph Bach (1642-1703)

[photo of J.C. Bach]



The Bach family spawned generations of musicians from the 16th to the 19th century. Their positions ranged from town fiddlers to church organists, court musicians, and prestigious *Kapellmeister* jobs in major courts. Johann Christoph Bach - not to be confused with J.S. Bach's youngest son, Johann Christian - was born in Arnstadt. At age 21 he became organist at the Arnstadt castle chapel. Two years later, he was appointed church organist at St. George's in Eisenach, as well as court musician to the Duke of Eisenach. He held both positions for 40 years. Christoph Bach was a first cousin of J.S. Bach's father, Johann Ambrosius Bach. Scholars believe that Sebastian (who was born in Eisenach) gained some knowledge of the organ by listening to his cousin Johann Christoph. It is clear that he admired his second cousin; he wrote of Christoph "he was a profound composer."

Christoph Bach was principally a keyboard player; however, he did compose three choral cantatas, a *dialogus* for several soloists, and 13 motets. *Fürchte dich nicht* takes its text from Isaiah 43:1, Luke 23:43, and a verse from Fricerich von Spee's chorale "O Traurigkeit, O Herzeleid." Essentially the text provides reassurance to those whose death is imminen. Bach's five-part setting places the *cantus firmus* chorale melody in the soprano. She represents the soul, imploring strength in the Saviour at the moment of death. Her entry is delayed, heightening the

expressive impact of her message.

Prelude and Fugue in B-flat minor, BWV 867

From *The Well Tempered Clavier*, Book I

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Vocal version by Heribert Breuer

[photo of J.S. Bach]



Anyone who remembers the Swingle Singers recordings from the 1960s knows how well Bach's instrumental works can transfer to the human voice. The plaintive B-flat minor Prelude from Book I of *The Well Tempered Clavier* is dense, sometimes in as many as seven pitches sounding at once; however, duplication of certain pitches in these chords allows its 'reduction' to five voices. The upper melody unfolds as a sort of *arioso*, with a recurrent rhythmic figure that governs the entire prelude. The effect is rather like a stately march.

Bach's fugue is one of only two in Book I of *The Well Tempered Clavier* in five voices. It is striking for its strict observance of the *stile antico*, the strict older counterpoint derived from Renaissance polyphony, particularly Palestrina. That stated, Bach's fugue subject, with its wide leap, is distinctly Baroque in its contour. There are no real divergent episodes, and canon plays a major role in the fugue. At one point, two voices in parallel motion, but on different pitches, state the subject simultaneously. Toward the end Bach uses *stretto*, a technique whereby imitation of the subject occurs in close and overlapping succession.

Sanctus and Agnus Dei from *Missa O Admirabile Commercium*

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina

As in the two Mass movements that opened this evening's program, these two - which conclude the sung portion of the Latin Mass - feature smooth melodic writing and sensitive handling of momentary dissonance. The effect is one of flawless balance. The Calmus Ensemble's quasi-palindromic first half takes us from Palestrina's purity to the late Baroque works of the two Bachs, then reprises the celestial Renaissance calm. Palestrina has the last word.

* * * * *

"Felicissimo sonno"

"Moro lasso"

From Fifth and Sixth Books of Madrigals

Carlo Gesualdo (1566-1613)

[photo of Gesualdo]



Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa, has earned a lurid place in music history. In October 1590, he murdered his wife Maria d'Avalos, daughter of the Marquis of Pescara, and her lover, the Duke of Andria, when he discovered them "*in flagrante delicto di flagrante peccato.*" The affair had been widely known for about two years. Because of the adulterous context and Gesualdo's noble rank, the double murder was not technically illegal, but Gesualdo prudently retired to his private estate for several years until the scandal abated.

As it happens, he was also a gifted composer with a radical approach to harmony, at least by the standards of the day. To place him in context: he was a generation younger than Palestrina, and the older man was the most prominent musician in Italy when Gesualdo came of age. One would *never* confuse Palestrina's music with Gesualdo's, which has been called "bizarrely chromatic."

Gesualdo had composed from a young age, and remained obsessed by music. His second marriage, to Leonora d'Este in 1593, gave him *entrée* to the illustrious court of Ferrara, over which Leonora's father, Duke Alfonso II, presided. Ferrara was a major center of music, and Gesualdo benefitted from a friendship with Luzzasco Luzzaschi, a composer and organist who was the leading musician at the Ferrarese court. Gesualdo was also fascinated by the *arcicembalo*, a keyboard instrument with 31 keys to the octave, thus enabling microtones. The Este court had

an *arcicembalo* in its instrument collection.

Gesualdo suffered from moodiness and melancholia and was apparently abusive to his second wife, whose powerful family eventually initiated divorce proceedings. It is generally thought that he died from some form of dementia - but not before composing an astounding quantity of music, both sacred and secular. His best known works are the six books of madrigals published between 1594 and 1616. More than four centuries after Gesualdo wrote them, these madrigals both captivate and disorient the ear.

“Felicissimo sonno” [‘Most fortunate slumber’] seeks to send a message to the sleeping beloved, revealing the singer’s tormented soul, and hoping that she will look favorably on his suit upon awakening. The phrasing structure is free, taking its pace from the words of the poem. Thus *sonno* - sleep - is peaceful and stretched out; while the closing line - “*e pietosa si desti*” - [hope that she will be merciful] is animated by hope.

“Moro lasso” relates the singer’s sorrow: he is dying of love, wretched in grief; the one who could give him life, alas, gives him death. The opening bars descend to a sepulchral register, representing suffering and the prospect of death. Only at the word ‘life’ - ‘*vita*’ in Italian - do the intertwining melodic lines grow briefly more energized. Carefully calculated dissonances emphasize the singer’s tortured emotions. Exaggerated contrast is central to Gesualdo’s style, which is the opposite extreme from the serenity and consistency of Palestrina.

Le chant des oiseaux

Clément Janequin (ca.1485-ca.1558)

[photo of Janequin]



No early records survive documenting Janequin’s childhood and education.

He was born in Chatellerault, in the former province of Poitou in west-central France, and we know that by 1505 he was working as a clerk for the vicar-general of the archbishopric in Bordeaux, then, from 1523, for the Bishop of Bordeaux. He held minor posts in various French cities, most notably Angers and, at the end of his life, Paris. He is best known for his *chansons* (the French term for madrigal), many of which are vivid illustrations of their poetic texts.

“Le chant des oiseaux” [The Song of the Birds] is one of the most celebrated - and a bit on the racy side. In its first part, the singers bid sleepy hearts awaken, for the god of love is calling on the first of May, and the birds will amaze you. Janequin’s following three parts sequentially introduce the royal song thrush and blackbird; the nightingale; and the cuckoo, shifting between brief French descriptors and nonsense syllables and music that emulate each bird’s chirping song. The text contains fleeting references to drinking, adultery, and other unholy behavior. Musically it is a wild romp, requiring split-second timing and flawless diction at a rapid pace: a 16th-century patter song.

“La bomba” from *Ensaladas*

Matheo Flecha (1481-1553)

[photo of Flecha]



Flecha was both a singer and a composer who became *maestro di capilla* at Lérida Cathedral in 1523. He served in several Spanish ducal courts in the 1540s, then as *maestro di capilla* for the Spanish *infantas* at Arévalo.

Most of Flecha’s compositions are *ensaladas*. The Spanish term - which also means salad - refers to a poem that commingles lines from other poems, or switches meters. *Ensaladas* can also mix languages, and are often intended to be humorous. In music, the mixture generally entails quotations from popular songs or others’ compositions, in the manner of a quodlibet. *Ensaladas* were especially popular in 16th-century Spain. Flecha is the best known composer of this genre, thanks to a collection: *Las Ensaladas de Flecha*, published by his nephew - also named Matheo

Flecha - in Prague in 1581. The collection, which was probably composed between 1535 and 1543, includes eight pieces with common Christmas themes. The texts are a jumble of Castilian, Catalan, Portuguese, Italian, and Latin.

The text of “La Bomba” is about a ship’s crew at sea in a violent storm. They fear they may run aground, and call frantically for a pump - the *bomba* of the title - and other actions to ensure that the ship does not come to grief. The sailors sing prayers to the Virgin and promise to make pilgrimages to Montserrat and Santiago if they are spared. (One of them regrets that he cannot swim.) Just when all appears lost, another ship appears on the horizon. They will be saved! All the men sing a prayer of thanks for their deliverance, then the celebration begins, complete with an out-of-tune guitar. They sing praises to the newborn Christ child, who has delivered them. The musical *mélange* ends with a solemn moral to the story: there are dangers on land as well as sea, and perils to be found in trusting one’s fellow man.

Program Notes by Laurie Shulman © 2022