

Reimagining the Renaissance

Choral Conducting Recital

Program Notes

Ryan W. Sullivan, conductor

An earthly tree, a heavenly fruit / Cast off all doubt and fear

William Byrd (c.1540 - 1623)

Though written separately, these two sacred songs are both from Byrd's publication *Songs of Sundrie Natures*. However, the composer did suggest that they be performed one immediately following the other, and that is what has been prepared for this performance. The first piece, "An earthly tree, a heavenly fruit" was originally scored for Soprano, Bass, three viols and a violoncello. Composites of the second and third viol were combined to create the new Bass vocal. The latter song, "Cast off all doubt and fear" was written for solely for voices but since these pieces are now conjoined, I added new string parts for the ending to gain a sense of larger compositional unity.

This sweet and merry month of May

William Byrd

With a goal to facilitate greater accessibility to six-part works like Byrd's "This Sweet and Merry Month of May," I decided to alter the original six-part vocal texture toward three-part voices and three strings. Historically, this is not revolutionary. Byrd and many of his contemporaries commonly replaced voices with a consort of viols or doubled voices with string instruments.

Each original part (Superius, Sextus, Medius, etc.) has been broken up and distributed to more than one voice and/or string part. This is accomplished at new sections of thematic material so as to avoid creating new voice-leading problems. The objectives for breaking up the original scoring were 1) to assign the more difficult rhythms and melodic leaps to the string parts, and 2) to maximize cohesive interaction between voices and strings as performing groups. The transposition from the original F Major to G Major has several benefits: the second voice is no longer in an extremely low vocal range and the third voice's tessitura is more appropriate for Cambiata II or Baritone singers. A secondary bonus to the higher key makes it somewhat easier for young string players who are more accustomed to playing in sharp keys.

Ce moy de may

Guillaume Dufay (1397 - 1474)

A very popular 15th century chanson, "Ce moy de may" was set by Dufay as a rondeau. As was common for the period, the composer made no mention of instrumentation. This does not mean that the piece was intended for voices only. Rather, musicians were at liberty to add doublings and improvise. The instrumental texture in this arrangement supports the modal function of the voices, and their polyrhythmic sense of three and two-ness but is distinctly independent of the parts written by Dufay.

*In this month of May let's be happy and joyous
And remove from our hearts melancholy;
Let's sing and dance and have a good time
To spite those envious wretches.*

*More than in other Mays, let each be careful
To serve his pretty mistress well;
In this month of May let's be happy and joyous
And remove from our hearts melancholy;*

For the season bids all lovers

*Do this, so let's not fail!
Dear friends, Dufay asks this of you
And Perinet will say it better and better.*

Le chant du rossignol

Clément Janequin (1485 - 1558)

This lesser-known chanson from Janequin's collection of bird songs has more accessible rhythms than the famous "Chant des Oyseaux." Of Janequin's bird-like chanson, Richard Taruskin wrote, "These orgies of onomatopoeia, sheer imaginative play, amount at times to long stretches of what might be best described as pure texture." For ease of learning, I have translated the original lyrics in Middle French to modern French without adjusting rhythms to accommodate syllables. To make the Soprano and Tenor ranges highly accessible, it has been transposed down a minor third. The newly written part for woodwind (recorder or flute) directly takes on the bird's character by interacting at the points of imitation in the voices, connecting seams, and signifying cadential arrivals.

*While listening to the melodious song
Of such pleasure as the sweet nightingale,*

*Who will say what happened in the park?
You will hear him who sings the best.*

*All, all, all want to be careful,
Love serves loyally everywhere,
And he cried thank, thanks, thanks while listening.*

*Come, come, come melancholy people.
Follow the ladies everywhere.
And for your worry, make your
Return on Tuesday, Tuesday, Tuesday
And you will be happy to listen.*

Ave Regina caelorum

Pierre de la Rue (c. 1452 - 1518)

La Rue's setting of this Marian text is predominated with consonance. Here, I experimented with the sonorities in a different spacing to accommodate lower voices. This adaptation was quite straightforward once the original vocal lines were re-assigned for consideration of tessitura. Subsequently the tonic was lowered one semi-tone from the original. A few small adjustments were made to accommodate acceptable range and follow voice leading principles.

*Hail, queen of heaven!
Hail, mistress of angels!
Hail, root, hail, portal,
From which the light for the world has risen.
Rejoice, glorious Virgin,
Beautiful above all others.
Farewell, most gracious,
And pray for us to Christ.*

Mon coeur a élu

Nicolas Gombert (c.1495 - c.1560)

First published in 1541 in the 9th Book of *Le Parangon des Chansons*, this piece was originally entitled "Mon cueur elist" and was scored for four mixed voices. In April of 2015 an edition was published on the Choral Public Domain Library by André Vierendeels and was scored for STTT. This prompted me to think about adapting the chanson to a more common treble ensemble voicing. Additionally, I discovered that Vierendeels' edition contained many inconsistencies with the original publication. This adaptation was straight forward in that the original voice lines were re-assigned for consideration of tessitura.

Subsequently the tonic was lowered one semi-tone from the original. The original text was translated by me from Middle French to modern French as well as modern English in order to increase accessibility.

O nata lux

Thomas Tallis (c.1505 - 1585)

Originally scored for five voices, this arrangement has been compressed to four. By removing doubled chord tones and splicing important material, we are able to honor the crux of Tallis' composition but with the ease of a standard SATB texture. The straight-forward form and relatively few harmonic shifts inform a sense of stasis that is uncommon in the Renaissance. A few of the musica ficta were altered to delay the sense harmonic arrival at the final.

*O born light of light,
Jesus, redeemer of the world,
Mercifully deem worthy and accept
the praises and prayers of your supplicants.
Thou who once deigned to be clothed in flesh
For the sake of the lost ones,
Grant us to be made members
Of your holy body.*

Nuper rosarum flores

Guillaume Dufay

A pillar of Renaissance isorhythm, this motet was commissioned for the consecration of the Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence, Italy. Sometimes referred to as "Brunelleschi's dome," this magnificent structure was built to imitate the described proportions of Solomon's temple. As a musical architect, Dufay organized the prolation (meter) around the same proportions: 6 - 4 - 2 - 3. A contemporary described the first performance as having "all manner of instruments" in addition to the choir. This instrumental texture is written to support the modal shifts happening in the voices, particularly the Soprano and Tenor but remains largely independent. Listen for two homages in the text: a formal "thank you" to Pope Eugenius IV for the blessing and funding to complete the cathedral (a homophonic tutti declaration), and to the city of Florence itself (a duet in the Tenor and Soprano).

CANTUS FIRMUS: Magnificent is this place!

*Recently garlands of roses
Given by the Pope - despite a terrible winter -
Adorned this temple of magnificent structure
Forever dedicated in a pious and holy fashion
To you, heavenly Virgin.
Today the vicar of Jesus Christ and successor of Peter,
Eugenius, has deigned to consecrate this same
Vast temple with his sacred hands and holy liquors.
Therefore, sweet parent and daughter of your Son,
Virgin, flower of virgins, your devoted people of Florence
Pray that anyone in agony
Who will have prayed for anything with a clean mind and body
Will deserve to receive by your prayer
And the merits of your Son in the flesh
The sweet gifts of his Lord and forgiveness of sins.*

Amen.