

«About the programme»

Serafino Ciminelli, dell'Aquila, or **Serafino Aquilano** was born to a «not ignoble» family on the 6th January 1466, which according to his friend and biographer Vincenzo Colli was «the second year of Pope Paulus II, the twenty-second year of Emperor Frederic III, and that of the death of Francesco Sforza, duke of Milan». While living with his uncle in Naples, he studied music with Guglielmo Fiamengo (Guillaume Garnier), and on his return to his home town after the death of his father in 1481, quickly garnered respect as an exponent of the work of Petrarch and Dante, for which he composed music and accompanied himself on the lute. He worked at various times for many patrons including Cardinal Ascanio Sforza, Francesco Gonzaga & Isabella d'Este, and Cesare Borgia, in Naples, Rome, Mantua, and Milan. He died on the 10th August 1500 in Rome, and was buried in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo.

The poems of Serafino Aquilano exist in many different editions published from 1502 onwards. Of the hundreds published, approximately 30 survive with musical settings, some with composer attributions and some anonymous. Although there is the chance that these were notated by someone who heard Serafino's own performance and captured his music, we cannot know for sure.

Voi che ascoltate opens the programme; this is the first of the strambotti in the 1516 edition of Serafino's work, which is used as the basis for this programme. Many Renaissance collections of music, both manuscript and print, put emphasis on a specific piece to open the collection, and as this poem sets the stage for the collection of strambotti, so the music sets the tone for Ottaviano Petrucci's fourth book of frottole. This is the first of Petrucci's frottola books to

give emphasis to the strambotto form, and this is the opening piece, *Io son l'ocel* by one of the most favoured frottola composers, Marchetto Cara.

(A note about the name *La Seraphina* – this completely brazen renaming of a piece of music (*La bernardina*) to suit the programme is not without purpose; the song which follows it uses the practice of «cantasi come», or «sing in the manner of», where (as happens throughout the history of music) existing musical material is used to carry a different text. The practice is self-evident for this type of repertoire; several of the existing musical settings for Serafino's strambotti exist with alternative texts in other sources.)

Some pieces in this programme are performed exactly as written, some use music from other sources, and some are arrangements of the existing musical material. Vide *Ite sospiri*: a beautiful text, and although one 4-voice setting of this text exists, it is one of the less convincing polyphonic compositions, and thus we allow ourselves a chance to reverse engineer from the existing material something which Serafino's audience may have heard, if this had been sung to the lira.

To present Serafino's work as a poet would need a different approach than to present his work in a concert. With only two exceptions (not counting those of doubtful attribution), the extant musical settings of his poetry are of strambotti, and some of these if played or sung exactly as they appear on the page take less than a minute. The temptation is to only ever use the longer settings, but it would be a pity to disregard those such as *Doglia mia acerba* and the two following strambotti which are, even though short, some of the loveliest music.

Serafino's connections to Josquin des Prez are reasonably well documented; though Serafino was variously described as a friend of Josquin and as a student of Josquin, what is clear is that for some time they shared a musical circle, and both were employed by Cardinal Ascanio Maria Sforza in the 1480s. (Cardinal Sforza was notoriously boorish towards his musicians; Serafino penned a sonetto in which he defended Josquin and obliquely criticised the cardinal. This was not his only foray into political commentary. A poetic diatribe in the form of an eclogue against the venality of the Pope's court was probably the reason for his dismissal and subsequent departure from his position in Rome.) A strong parallel between the two is the esteem in which they were held by their peers. In Josquin's case, one of Susato's books of chansons has a section devoted to a selection of chanson-motets which were written in his honour after his death. Similarly, the 1516 edition of Serafino's poetry is introduced with a compilation of poems praising him, followed by a description of his life by Vincenzo Colli. Some of the settings of Serafino's poetry also share musical ideas with Josquin's work. Two of the musical settings which exist (but unfortunately did not fit into today's programme), one by Heinrich Isaac and one anonymous, have the same type of sequences that we hear in Josquin's instrumental works *La Bernardina* and *Fortuna disperata*.

In contrast to the strambotti, some frottola forms are quite long. One of Serafino's (although of disputed authorship) which has a contemporary musical setting is an ode, which would be challenging to present to a modern audience since the repetition of 20 seconds of musical material would last for over 10 minutes. Therefore the two longer forms in this programme, a capitulo and a barzelletta, have been shortened to conform to the available material. The capitulo (*Ben puoi tu lucidar, candida Aurora*) uses only

the amount of text given in the musical source, and the barzioletta (*Fui serrato nel dolore*, sung to the music of Tromboncino's *Ostinato vo' seguire*) adheres to approximately the number of stanzas which appear for any barzioletta in the book from which the music was taken.

The «consort» aspect of the frottola, that is to say a performance of a 4-voice frottola setting with a homogenous ensemble, be it 4 voices, 4 viols, 4 wind instruments, or an intabulation for plucked instrument(s), is definitely an important consideration when choosing the instrumentation of a frottola programme. However in this concert it has been eschewed in favour of highlighting the various possibilities and colour combinations available with a mixed consort. The 3-part setting of *Consumo la vita mia* is a very good demonstration of this; since it is a rare example in which all voices are in a very similar range, this rather short piece (another strambotto setting) will be played three times with the instruments swapping voices.

Io piango (strambotto) is another setting which requires some arranging. It can be found in a beautifully decorated manuscript, but with a page missing that means only 2 voices of the original 4 are there. Since the existing voices are cantus and tenor it would be relatively simple to reconstruct a 4-voice setting, but the fragmentary nature of this source lends itself to a different interpretation, and the use of only a lira da gamba as accompaniment.

Arrangements are also required for some of the instrumental pieces. This version of Tromboncino's *Vergine bella* was originally for keyboard; lute and harp is a completely plausible duo combination, but nothing specifically for these instruments has been transmitted. There are many arrangements of this repertoire for lute

alone, for lute duo, or for keyboard, but direct transcriptions of these risk being slightly unidiomatic and therefore unsatisfactory to play. The arrangement refers to the original frottola, but mostly uses the material and the ornamentation written in the keyboard version. The harp solo arrangement of *Bench'el ciel* uses a similar idea in reverse, adding ornamentation found in instrumental arrangements of other pieces to the basic frottola.

Some of the instrumental introductions to the strambotti come from Petrucci's 1509 collection of frottole where the settings are arrangements for voice and lute by Franciscus Bossinensis (Libro primo), and in which the last part of the book is devoted to ricercars allocated to specific pieces according to the mode. This practice of an instrumental prelude is alluded to in various ways in other contemporary sources, even for the viola da gamba, and because of this we have taken the Bossinensis ricercars as a basis and adapted them for the instruments at hand. For this reason, and also to allow for improvisation in the concert, they are deliberately not listed as separate pieces in the programme.

Serafino's poetry is deserving of more exposure than it gets, but the frottola repertoire is so vast that, understandably, works by well-known composers will often take precedence. Some musical settings just did not fit into the programme even though for both musical and literary reasons they invite attention. One such is *Gridan vostri occhi al mio cor «Fora fora!»*, a very nice musical setting of a strambotto in which every line ends with an echo, in a slightly different way to how the echoes are treated in *Deh, fusse*, where the echo may only be a part of the previous word. Another is *Vox clamantis in deserto; facta son che pieta chiamo*. This barzetta from Petrucci's Frottole Book III uses a Latin incipit in the same manner as Josquin's *In te domine speravi*, which will be included in the

ReRenaissance programme in November. But *Vox clamantis* was left out for a purely practical reason; there are various ways of performing a frottola when presented with a 4-voice setting. With only one singer, there are arguments both for and against a low voice (as we have today). With a low male voice, there is the opportunity to use the lira da braccio, which does work better with the contrasting registers of instrument and voice. There is also the huge flexibility of him being able to sing any voice of the polyphony (depending on what the piece demands), with the usual caveat that if it is the cantus line (which in frottole is generally the one which carries the text) it must be an octave lower. The benefit of a high voice, on the other hand, is that one can choose instrumentation very easily and always be sure that voice crossings are not a problem. Only occasionally does one encounter a piece – and *Vox clamantis* is, very unfortunately, one of these – where if only one voice is texted it must be the cantus, and to transpose it an octave lower simply does not work harmonically. Also waiting for another opportunity is the barzeletta *Lasso far a mi*, probably a play on Josquin's *La sol fa re mi*, which is thought to be a comment on his patron's answer «Laise faire moy» when asked for financial help.

The final piece, *Vanne canzona mia*, is like the first piece only transmitted as text, and here Jacob has composed his own melody and accompaniment. This has a special place in the 1516 collection, separate from the other sonetti, and seems an appropriate close to this very small taste of the work of Serafino Aquilano.

«About the instruments»

Although it was possible to accompany one's own singing on many different instruments, the early 16th century **lira da braccio** is probably the one which best encapsulates the spirit of turn-of-the-century Italian recitation. The practice of accompanying one's own singing with a bowed string instrument was not new to the the 1500s but was widespread in the late middle ages; however its association with Apollo is ubiquitous in late-15th and early-16th century paintings and prints, and there is a surprising number of extant instruments which survive with some parts unchanged, suggesting that as a real instrument it was not uncommon. The lira da braccio has what seems nowadays to be a very limited range of keys in which it will sound good, but from another perspective this only gives more importance to the text.

The Renaissance **harp**, otherwise known as the bray harp, is a harp that uses small wooden pins both to hold a string in place and to rest lightly against it, producing a buzzing note. The tone produced carries much further than the sound of a plain string, taking advantage of overtones, and with judicious damping allows a good harpist a wide range of articulation and phrasing. This type of harp was in use for centuries; in the 14th, 15th, and early 16th century it was the default type of instrument, and even though many harps in the 16th century were without brays, in some regions some types of harps continued to be equipped with them (and in use) until well into the 17th century.

Lira, cetra, cithara – all terms denoting a particular type of instrument which in 15th- and early 16th- century Italy alluded to the lyre of Orpheus, something which was absolutely necessary when accompanying yourself in song or recitation. All the instruments on stage fall into this

category to some degree, but the **cetra** is probably the most extreme form of this idea, a Renaissance humanist recreation of an antique instrument. It is unusual in being strung with metal and has a re-entrant tuning similar to that of the later English cittern.

The **viola d'arco** is now generally thought to be the earliest form of the viola da gamba. The instrument first appears in written sources and pictures in the 1480s and was a favourite of Isabella d'Este. Isabella apparently had a consort of viols, but the iconography very often shows only one, or at the most two. The viola d'arco as it existed in the early 16th century very probably developed out of a form of bowed vihuela used in Neapolitan court circles, which would have been an instrument with a flat or almost flat bridge, making playing a single line impossible in the same way that it is on the later lirone. Even though there is little direct evidence for it, iconography from Italy and southern Germany in the first quarter of the 16th century suggests that some viole d'arco were in fact instruments with a flatter bridge and would have had more in common with the lira da braccio than with the viola da gamba. The **lira da gamba** used in this programme is tuned in alternating re-entrant 4ths and 5ths like a later lirone, but there is still room for experimentation in reconstructing this type of early lira da gamba.