

Love & Jazz from 1603 (and thereabouts) | Program Notes

Fire and Love, Italian Style

In Italy there is an old saying... “L’Italiano è la lingua della musica, degli angeli, e dell’ Amore.” (Italian is the language of music, of the angels, and of Love.)

Italians are passionate about art and love. In a piazza in Tuscany on a hot summer night, it is not unusual to see two young men get into a fist fight over a girl. The Italian language is particularly emotional, being full of strong inflections and accents. Did the language develop in this way because of the emotional temperament of its people? Or vice versa? Whichever is the case, it’s clear that composers from Monteverdi to Vivaldi and beyond have always been aware of their language’s particular ability to convey feelings of love – not to mention the jealousy and despair that often goes along with amorous adventures.

In Venice, the beautiful *palazzi* that line the grand canal were the scenes of lively music parties for centuries. In the 17th century, Monteverdi was the Maestro di Capella at the great basilica of San Marco, but he also provided the aristocrats of Venice with plenty of love songs and party music. About 100 years later, Antonio Vivaldi walked those same streets, and provided the Venetians with passionate operas as well as lively instrumental concertos for the city’s famous orchestra of young ladies.

Nicola (Antonio) Porpora was an Italian opera composer and teacher of singing, whose most famous singing student was the castrato Farinelli. While living in Vienna, he was also a mentor to the young Josef Haydn, who was a struggling freelancer at the time. Porpora’s aria **ALTO GIOVE**, which I have arranged as an instrumental piece, is from the opera *Polifemo*. Polyphemus, the giant son of Poseidon, loved the sea-nymph Galatea, and wooed her with no success. A sense of love and longing rings through Porpora’s beautiful harmonies. In my arrangement, the vocal line is given to a solo violinist, who is eventually answered by a companion violinist in a flirtatious encounter.

About 100 years before Vivaldi, Claudio Monteverdi and his colleagues, including Giovanna Battista Fontana and Barbara Strozzi, provide the aristocrats of Venice, Rome, and Mantua with material for frequent salons and music-parties. Fontana’s surviving compositions are mostly violin sonatas (for one or two violins) with continuo. These lovely chamber pieces graced the salons of the Italian nobility. Barbara Strozzi was a fascinating figure, who will return to the Apollo’s Fire stage next fall in a program called “Feminine Takeover 1601.” She was one of the many illegitimate daughters of Venetian nobility. Her father is thought to have been Giulio Strozzi, an aristocratic poet and librettist who helped Barbara in her career as a singer and composer. Strozzi’s haunting song, **CHE SI PUÒ FARE**, is based on the popular passacaglia ground bass – a repeating pattern of four descending notes.

Monteverdi composed the *Scherzi Musicali* (musical jokes) in 1607 for the entertainment of the Duke of Mantua, his family, and friends. The texts of the Scherzi are flirtatious and playful, generally centering on the theme of *carpe diem* – elegant attempts to convince young ladies to bestow their romantic favors now, and not wait till they are too old to enjoy it.

Monteverdi’s great opera *L’Incoronazione di Poppea* concerns the Emperor Nero – an evil madman – and his mistress Poppea. Poppea is darkly driven by ambitions to push Nero’s wife Ottavia out of the picture (even if this means exile or death for the innocent Ottavia). In the final scene, Ottavia has been gotten rid of and Poppea triumphantly prepares to be crowned Empress of Rome. She and Nero sing of their love for each other in the famous duet **PUR TI MIRO** (“I ADORE YOU”). Here, Monteverdi masterfully draws us into the joys of love, forcing us to consider that even when Love exists between evil people, it is still a miraculous thing.

We hope this evening of Italian romance inspires your week.