

## Review: Ensemble Origo, Doing the Lowbrow With Dignity

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The dignified profiles of Dante and Michelangelo adorn the proscenium arch of the neo-Renaissance theater inside Columbia University's Italian Academy. During a concert there by the Ensemble Origo on Thursday, I often gazed up at them, wondering what these luminaries of Italian art and high letters would have made of the evening's program of motets, madrigals and "moresche" by Orlando di Lasso.

There was little lofty poetry among the texts, save for a setting of a stanza of Petrarch's "Canzoniere," "If my weary lines can fly so high as to reach her," set in elegant five-part harmony and performed with cool poise and accuracy by the Origo singers. But that text only threw into relief the bawdiness of the surrounding material, most of which might be summed up under the title "If my leering lines can swoop so low as to breach her."

The program, with its eye-popping contrasts between high-minded art and lowbrow entertainment, was a reconstruction of music performed in honor of the 1568 wedding in Munich of Renate of Lorraine to Wilhelm V, the Duke of Bavaria's heir. Those festivities stretched over 18 days with musical contributions by Lasso that included a *Te Deum*, a motet performed during dinner, an evening of *moresche* (risqué songs sung in the pidgin Italian of African slaves) and a *commedia dell'arte* show filled with other stereotyped foreigners and lewd innuendo.

Recent scholarship has shown that Lasso's *moresche* contain genuine snippets of Kanuri, the language of the Bornu Empire in what is now northeastern Nigeria, which was an important source of slaves for the European market. Mixed with Neapolitan dialect and onomatopoeic gibberish, these words lend an intriguing hint of authenticity to these rustic songs.



*Nathaniel Cox, left, and Lawrence Jones of Ensemble Origo, at Columbia University's Italian Academy. Credit: Michael DiVito*

Just how much of this the wedding guests in Munich understood is uncertain. But they surely got the gist of the increasingly desperate attempts by a servant named Giorgio to woo the slave girl Lucia with promises of golden shoes with heels so high that they require a sharp jump in register by one of the sopranos. In any case, Lucia's best lines, in which she berates Giorgio for soiling the bed, tells him he stinks like old tuna and sends him packing to the kitchen to go lick the pot, are safely rendered in Italian.

The Origo singers, capably led by the ensemble's director, Eric Rice, and sometimes accompanied on period instruments by a fine, flexible ensemble, for the most part maintained straight faces and a clean, almost prudish, style. One might have wished for a greater differentiation between the chiffony sound with which they sang the beautiful *Te Deum* and the one they brought to *commedia dell'arte* numbers like "Matona, mia cara," a ribald sendup of a German lancer (nudge, nudge) who applies all his nation's proverbial diligence and phonetic inflexibility to the task of serenading an Italian lady.