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Monteverdi's Madrigals as Live-Action Dramas

Tenet Vocal Ensemble at Italian Academy, Columbia University

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On the second floor of the Italian Academy at Columbia University, a 1927 building in the style of a neo-Renaissance palazzo, is the Teatro, a commodious room with a carved-wood ceiling and a small stage. This is the kind of elegant space in which Book 8 of Monteverdi's madrigals would probably have been performed in the composer's day. So said the violinist Scott Metcalfe, the guest music director of the estimable vocal ensemble Tenet, on Saturday night to an audience of nearly 200 attending the group's sold-out performance of excerpts from that astonishing Monteverdi collection, "Madrigals of Love and War."



Robert Caplin for The New York Times

Tenet Members of the ensemble performed a Monteverdi program, "Madrigals of Love and War," at the Italian Academy at Columbia University.

And astonishing is the word for these madrigals. Though published in 1638, Book 8 has works written over nearly two decades. In program notes Mr. Metcalfe described the collection as a “great grab bag of genres, styles, affects and effects,” organized in two halves labeled “Canti Guerrieri” and “Canti Amadorosi” (“Songs of War” and “Songs of Love”).

Monteverdi was a pioneer in transforming the old-style madrigal (a song for multiple voices, one to a part) into the concertato madrigal, with continuo and instrumental accompaniments, elaborate works that blur the distinctions between song and opera. A performance of the entire Book 8 would take about two and a half hours. Tenet, which had six singers and six instrumentalists for this occasion, performed eight selections (along with an instrumental interlude by Dario Castello) in a well-conceived program lasting just over an hour.

In Book 8 Monteverdi advances a style of setting words in which the music captures not just the flow and accents of speech but also the intense emotions behind the words and sometimes depicts the actions of the characters in the drama. On Saturday the work that most exemplified Monteverdi’s innovations was “Lamento della Ninfa,” a setting of a text adapted by Ottavio Rinuccini.

The tenors Aaron Sheehan and Sumner Thompson and the bass Mischa Bouvier sang the extended first part of the work, in which the singers set the scene, like narrators in a live-action drama. A heartsick maiden emerges from her dwelling before daylight, pale and miserable, having been abandoned by her lover. At the words “il suo dolor,” referring to the sorrow that can be seen on the young woman’s face, Monteverdi tweaks the harmonies with piercing dissonance, sung with restrained beauty by these three fine singers.

Then the young maiden appears: here, the soprano Jolle Greenleaf, the artistic director of Tenet. Suddenly the madrigal morphs into quasi opera as the maiden voices her grief directly.

Throughout this collection of madrigals, in the poetry and in Monteverdi's lush music, images of war and love mingle to present relationships as a constant battle of emotions, tactics, conquests and defeats. To end the program Tenet performed the introduction to a ballo, a court ballet, "Movete al Mio Bel Suon" ("Dance to My Beautiful Playing"). But no one should be fooled by this lively, beguiling music. The piece is still a madrigal with war-fraught imagery and music about the confusing dance of love.

Tenet's next program, "Requiem Aeternam," is on Nov. 14 at Park Avenue Christian Church, at 85th Street, Manhattan; (646) 470-5809, tenetnyc.com.

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