

NOTES

The concert's title comes from a piece in the third set—a line in William Byrd's *Ye sacred muses*: “Come down from crystal heav'ns above, to earth, where sorrow dwelleth.” The line simply popped off the page during the concert's preparation as a theme began to show itself—a theme that persisted in medieval and renaissance thought. Once upon a time the cosmos was made up of tidy layers. But existence in the shiny layer at the top was lost forever after the Fall, and Mankind can only imagine a return to that elusive state of perfection. But in the meantime, myriad experiences await this “traveler through life,” who wades through the proverbial vale of tears.

We begin our concert with a set of sacred pieces as we seek the “crystal heaven's above.” Some time before 1530, **John Taverner**, Cardinal Wolsey's musical appointee at Christ Church, Cambridge, composed the mass *Gloria tibi trinitas* on the plainchant of the same title. A certain spot in the Benedictus on the words “in nomine Domine” sparked the imaginations of composers—for the next 150 years. The hundreds of resulting **In nomine** are instrumental compositions that revolve around the chant that appears in slower note values, usually in the alto line. These pieces have lost their religious connotation, although many of them are serious, assuming the character of the chant melody. We open with Taverner's prototype: the first instrumental *In nomine* from his *Gloria tibi trinitas*. The third piece, the *In nomine* by **Christopher Tye**, a younger contemporary of Taverner and Edward VI's music teacher, is unusually whimsical: the chant lies high in the treble with the other contrapuntal lines skipping about below it.

The **consort song** was a uniquely English type of composition that lasted from the late 16th century well into the 17th century, outliving the flashier English madrigal. It is typically for solo voice (or voices) accompanied by three to five viols; most of this program's vocal pieces are consort songs. The anonymous consort song, *Come Holy Ghost*, is based on the *In nomine* chant in the alto line. The formal Christian text is a 16th-century poetic type called a “Fourteener” with fourteen slightly sing-song syllables per line. The text of John **Wilbye**'s consort song *Ne reminiscaris* sets the Ash Wednesday antiphon that precedes the seven penitential psalms. You will hear a particularly high note in the phrase, “do not be *angry* with us forever.” A famous madrigal composer, Wilbye was employed by the Cornwallis family in Suffolk, but spent considerable time in London.

In the second set, we fall “to earth where sorrow dwelleth” to witness the unhappy side of love. The 15th-century courtly poem *Ab, Robyn* has two speakers: one is convinced that his mistress (leman) is unfaithful and lying about it, while the other cannot fathom such deceit. Musically, a haunting quality is established as the two lower lines trade off a repeated canon. Well known in his day, the composer **William Cornysh** held a prestigious position at the Chapel Royal during King Henry VIII's reign.

We jump several generations to *Sorrow, come* by **John Dowland**, who wallowed in the fashionable melancholia of the day—even writing a viol consort pavan whose title is a pun on his own name: *Semper Dowland, semper dolens* (always Dowland, always doleful). He had some cause: he failed to land the coveted job of lutenist at Queen Elizabeth's court and subsequently worked abroad for many years. *Sorrow, come*'s plaintive text is reminiscent of both religious poetry and a lover's complaints. Is this poem about a rejected lover, or a sinful soul? Perhaps both, since contemporary readers delighted in double-purposed meanings.

The anonymous *When Daphne from fair Phoebus did fly* has an irresistible tune in a rollicking waltz-like meter. The renaissance pastoral poem presents Apollo as a broken-hearted lover deprived of satisfaction—rather than as a predator chasing down a defenseless young woman. The complete Greek myth is related here although we have condensed the third and fourth verses into a single one.

Thomas Morley made his name as a composer of madrigals. The urbane Elizabethan was employed first at St. Paul's in London before becoming a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal in 1592. The program's three duets for two viols are from a set of nine “canzonets.” In spite of their varied Italian titles, most of the nine pieces work the same way, starting slowly and ending up as cheerful romps with similar types of figuration. But if you listen carefully, you'll hear the cooing of the turtledoves in *La tortorella*, and a sad, slow-paced seven-note motive that recurs in the treble line of *Il doloroso. Il Grillo*, in the fourth set, displays Morley's favorite motifs: overlapping dotted quarter notes and running scales. Such exuberance fits the nature of the cricket as described in early bestiaries: he loved singing so much that he would forget to eat or sleep.

We reach rock-bottom to experience the ultimate sorrow in the third set. The anonymous *O Death, rock me asleep* has been attributed to Anne Boleyn, supposedly written while she was imprisoned in the Tower of London before her beheading in 1536. The evidence for her authorship is questionable—but nonetheless, a more poignantly doleful piece can hardly be found.

William Byrd wrote the elegy *Ye Sacred Muses* for his colleague, business partner, and friend, Thomas Tallis (d. 1585), who was about thirty-five years his senior. Both of these renowned composers lived remarkably long lives, and both enjoyed Queen Elizabeth's favor, even though they were Catholics in a Protestant land. In this work, Byrd accomplishes something very unusual: the brevity of the six-line mythological poem combined with the music's soaring eloquence leave the listener stunned by the eerie feeling of having witnessed a very private sorrow from centuries ago.

The acclaimed but short-lived composer **Orlando Gibbons** was appointed organist to the Chapel Royal by King James I. His famous madrigal, *The Silver Swan*, is "apt for Viols and Voyces," according to the title page. The text proceeds normally enough until the curious last line, "More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise." In fact, the idea that death takes the good ones and lets the bad ones live was a common trope in 16th-century lament poetry. For example, here is the last stanza of an elegy for Nicholas Grimald by Barnabe Googe:

A thousand doltish geese we might have spared,
A thousand witless heads death might have found,
And taken them for whom no man had cared,
And laid them low in deep oblivious ground.
But fortune favors fools, as old men say,
And lets them live, and takes the wise away.

The set's viol fantasies by **Byrd** and **Henry Purcell** stand years apart in their dates of composition. But both these, and the other fantasies on the program, adhere to the definition offered by the composer Christopher Simpson in 1667, who emphasizes the musical freedom and variety of the genre. "In this sort of Musick the Composer ... doth employ all his Art and Invention about the bringing in and carrying on of ... Fuges.... When he has tryed all the several ways which he thinks fit to be used therein; he takes some other point, and does the like with it: or else, for variety, introduces some Chromatick Notes ... or what else his fancy should lead him to..."

Although **Byrd's** four-part *fantasy* begins with a mournful four-note recurring theme, it ends with a virtuosic display of tumbling scales, and in keeping with Simpson's definition, it exploits a wealth of contrapuntal techniques. **Henry Purcell**, the youngest composer on the program, was England's most celebrated master of baroque music. He wrote a set of fifteen viol fantasies at a relatively tender age in an antiquated late-renaissance style that he never used again. Indeed, these pieces represent the pinnacle of the genre as well as its last gasp. This particular *fantasy* keeps a stately tempo throughout, but modulates into distant keys that challenge the harmonic traditions of any era. Following his death at the age of thirty-six, the officials at Westminster Abby supplied this epitaph: "Here lyes Henry Purcell Esq., who left this life and is gone to that blessed place where only his harmony can be exceeded."

The program's last set is a reprieve from death's finality. It revels in springtime and the renewal associated with that season. In keeping with the "pastoral tradition," you'll notice that the ribaldry we associate with the Elizabethan era is here taken over by the birds, who return yearly to nest. *The dark is my delight* from John Marston's 1604 comedy, *The Dutch Courtezan*, is sung by the title character. She gives her nightingale, which often symbolizes lovers' fidelity and loss (think of the departure scene in *Romeo and Juliet*), a titillating role. The anonymous *This merry pleasant spring* is almost entirely made up of onomatopoeic birdcalls with a plea at the conclusion that the birds might always return. In literature, the cuckoo is an unsavory symbol for (male) infidelity because it lays eggs in other birds' nests. None of that behavior is evident in **Richard Nicholson's** *Cuckoo*, in which its distinctive call, a falling major third, dominates the song. European composers have always loved to imitate the cuckoo's call, which first appears in medieval chansons.

Thomas Lupo worked for royalty, first for Queen Elizabeth in her "violin consort," and later, in the households of Princes Henry and Charles, sons of King James I. Lupo's trio is sublimely simple and warm in tone—a paean to the viol's ability to blend its sweet, nasal sound in a consort setting.

—Margaret Panofsky