

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 4 February 2024
7.30pm

Songs from a Beautiful Mouth - Barbara Strozzi

Solomon's Knot

Eligio Quinteiro theorbo
Emilia Benjamin lirone
Jan Zahourek violone
Siobhán Armstrong harp
Walewein Witten harpsichord

Zoë Brookshaw soprano
Clare Lloyd-Griffiths soprano
Kate Symonds-Joy alto
Thomas Herford tenor
David de Winter tenor
Jonathan Sells bass

Thomas Guthrie director
Matteo Dalle Fratte language
coach

Barbara Strozzi (1619-1677) Il primo libro de madrigali Op. 1 (pub. 1644)

*Sonetto. Proemio dell'opera • L'amante timido eccitato •
Godere in gioventù • Con le belle non ci vuol fretta •
Libertà • Le Tre Grazie a Venere • Priego ad Amore •
Silentio nocivo • Godere e tacere •
Il contrasto de' cinque sensi • L'Usignuolo •
La vittoria • Conclusione dell'opera*

Interval

*L'amante modesto • La quaglia, sonetto burlesco •
Pace arrabbiata • Dialogo in partenza •
Canto di bella bocca • Al Battitor di Bronzo della sua
crudellissima Dama • Dal pianto de gli amanti scherniti •
L'Affetto Umano • Consiglio amoroso •
Gli amanti falliti • Il ritorno*



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'Crowned with laurels of immortality.
Maybe they'll call me the new Sappho'

For any young musician, no matter how talented, it would be a bold statement to make. To make it within the opening stanzas of one's first publication is nothing short of audacious. And so, in that opening salvo, Barbara Strozzi laid down the approach that was to sustain a lifetime of work.

Any biography of Strozzi is frustrated by the paucity of surviving evidence, but the fragments that remain hint at a life both richly and courageously lived. She was born in Venice in 1619, the daughter of Isabella Griega, the housekeeper and heir-designate of the poet and academician Giulio Strozzi. Isabella and Giulio lived together, most likely as common-law spouses, and Giulio quickly amended his will to include little Barbara, later legally claiming her as his daughter. While early 17th-century Venice was still a society cruelly marked by misogyny, some protofeminist light was beginning to shine, with pioneering women writers, artists and musicians agitating for their rights. Giulio Strozzi – librettist to Monteverdi, member of the Venetian intelligentsia – was a vocal supporter of these women, and made sure of his daughter's education as both composer and performer. By the age of 17 Barbara had two volumes of music written expressly for her by Nicolò Fontei, with texts provided by her father. At 18 she was the presiding member of the *Accademia degli Unisoni*, a drinking, debating, musical society founded by Giulio. While the *Unisoni* was short-lived, Strozzi's career was just beginning, and over the next 30 years she would go on to publish and promote eight volumes of her own music, cultivating patrons and performances throughout Europe. Lauded by her contemporaries for her *virtù* (neither 'virtue' nor 'virtuosity' but something of both), mocked in an anonymous satire alongside her fellow academy members, she was remembered, after her death in 1677, as musician and poet. A hundred years on, she was named the inventor of the cantata.

Returning to the beginning: in October of 1644, juggling the demands of her musicianship and the needs of her four young children, she published her Op. 1, dedicated to Vittoria della Rovere, Grand Duchess of Tuscany. A collection of duets, trios and madrigals, each piece was composed to a text written by her father, whose words framed the collection as a deliberately curated presentation. The subject matter is typical of the period: love, beauty and the comedy and pathos of human existence. These are no straightforward love songs, however, but calculated displays of verbal and vocal excellence. There is evidence of the academy debate format in 'Le Tre Grazie' and 'Il contrasto de' cinque sensi', and a skewering of hyperbolic love language in 'Dal pianto de gli amanti scherniti'. While the foolishness of lovers is much in evidence, so are more serious situations. Nowhere is this more keenly felt than in 'L'Usignuolo', which gives voice to the outraged Philomela of classical mythology, raped and mutilated

by a man she trusted, pouring out her rage and demands for justice.

This volume is an incredibly assured debut, showcasing the beginnings of the musical gestures that Strozzi would come to advance over the course of her career. The pieces vary in structure and style as they move between different voice combinations and topics: some light and catchy ('L'Amante timido eccitato'), some conversational ('Dialogo in partenza'), and some, such as 'Silentio nocivo', presaging the later developments of her cantata monodramas. Four particular features of Strozzi's style stand out: madrigalic illustration of word meanings, dexterous fluidity of vocal line, interplay between basso continuo and voice, and a flair for the dramatic. Wordpainting is everywhere: a full ensemble battering repetition of 'the angry voice' in 'L'Usignuolo', a deliberate display of florid singing for the first appearance of the word song ('canto') in the volume's opening number, and the dropping down to hell in the bass voice for 'inferno' in 'Libertà'. Extended fioritura is displayed time and again, most notably in 'Canto di bella bocca', 'Sonetto. Proemio dell' opera', and 'Il ritorno'. The interaction between instrumental and vocal line in 'Dialogo in partenza' and 'Al battitor di bronzo' is a reminder that Strozzi was both instrumentalist and singer, recorded as playing and singing at the same time. Finally, there are hints of the ways in which she would later fully exploit a dramatic, theatrical presentation of text through music in certain moments of 'Consiglio amoroso' and 'L'Affetto Umano.'

Beyond these musical considerations, there is something else to note about Strozzi's Op. 1: the very fact of its publication. Most of the possibilities for composers at the time were heavily bound to specific social roles: a musician tied to a certain court, church or convent. Venice, a mercantile society at the centre of the European publishing trade, offered the possibility of something different: musician as entrepreneur. By printing her works and building multiple patronage relationships Strozzi was able to expand her musical reach. Exploiting the most popular form of vocal music in her own time – the cantata – meant that her music could be performed by professionals and amateurs far beyond her own circle. The spread of her printed works ensured the inclusion of her legacy in the first encyclopaedias of musical history to appear in the 18th Century. Despite the later erasure of women in music, these documents have led us back to a celebration of her talents.

When the Strozzi – daughter and father – crafted the closing stanzas of this first volume, I hope they may have imagined something of this future.

'In a bright flash,
a shining brilliance,
new music will now appear...
I will sing you a better tune.
If you don't believe me, just keep listening.'

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