

Collegium Vocale Gent / Dunford / Herreweghe @ Wigmore Hall, London

2 June 2015



by [Barry Creasy](#) | posted on 3 Jun 2015 in [reviews](#)

Whether the peculiar ‘twisted’ nature of Carlo Gesualdo’s later music was a by-product of remorse after his murder of his wife and her lover, or whether it was that, as ruler of his Principality, unlike his hireling-composer contemporaries (such as Claudio Monteverdi), he was free to experiment without fear of dismissal, we will probably never know. Tuesday night’s concert at the Wigmore Hall was an iridescent performance by Collegium Vocale Gent of, arguably, the most extreme example of Gesualdo’s latter style: all 23 of his 1611 sixth and last book of madrigals, *Il sesto Libro de Madrigali*.



Philippe Herreweghe
(Photo: Michiel Hendryckx)

The music itself was breathtaking, leaving the listener with the sort of feeling usually experienced whilst watching high-wire trapeze artists. Gesualdo’s harmony is almost atonal in places – the chromatic shifts in the music are scarcely believable in a 21st-century context, let alone a 17th-century one. At one point two singers would sing the same passage, matched in rhythm and tempo, but seemingly singing in two different keys. Or a single voice would produce a note so unrelated to the rest of the texture that, for a second, you believed it was wrong – but then slowly, the harmony would coalesce around the new note.

Tempo and volume shifted constantly, giving us sometimes louder, fluttering rapid passages, and at others languorous extended cadential phrases that sometimes resolved a semitone lower than expected. Word-painting abounds in the music, and this is high-Renaissance imagery at its strongest – full of sighs and moans and ‘dying’ and denial; metaphor is so heavily laid on that we’re never sure whether the refusal of an offer of conjugation is public and general or intimate and specific.

The performance was masterly – each singer adding exactly the right amount of individual tone and personality, and yet allowing the whole to be blended; the performance brought to life the sensuous and varying texts of each madrigal, from the “sweet venom upon that fair breast” of *Ardita Zanzaretta* to “an excess of joy” in *Quando ridente e bella*. Along with the five voices, each madrigal was accompanied by a chitarrone that allowed arpeggio

expansion of the cadences, and contributed exactly the right percussive note to other sections of the text.

Interspersed with the madrigals were three surprisingly gentle Toccatas by Giovanni Kapsberger from his *Libro primo d'intavolatura di lauto* (plus a bonus performance of Joan Dalza's *Calata*) played, on the chitarrone, with exquisite skill by Thomas Dunford. The erotic force of the Gesualdo, however, was not interrupted; like, seemingly, all the best lutenists, Dunford stared dreamily at the neck of his instrument while he played, and the music that poured forth felt like an extemporised expression of intimate communion.

One small niggle at the performance might, perhaps, be seen as heresy, as Philippe Herreweghe is the heart and soul of Collegium Vocale, and a mighty figure in Early-Music circles, but the evening could have benefited from the absence of a conductor onstage: the performers were clearly capable of performing without direction, and the madrigals are such intimate pieces, that the presence of a conductor in front of them gave the visual performance an unwontedly formal look, and was even a little distracting.