

ALBUQUERQUE BAROQUE PLAYERS
with guest soprano KATHRYN MUELLER

7:30 p. m., Saturday, 27 April 2013, Fellowship Christian Reformed Church
3:00 p. m., Sunday, 28 April 2013, Historic Old San Ysidro Church, Corrales

APRIL IS THE CRUELEST MONTH

Semelé.....Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre (c. 1664-1729)
soprano, oboe, recorder, basso continuo

Lachrimae Pavan.....Johann Schop (c. 1590-1667)
viola da gamba, basso continuo

Bess of Bedlam.....Henry Purcell (1659-1695)
Morpheus, thou gentle god.....Daniel Purcell (16?-1717)
soprano, basso continuo

*****intermission*****

“Per te lasciai la luce,” from Da quel giorno fatale, HWV 99.....George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)
soprano, viola da gamba, basso continuo

Sonata in C minor, Wq. 132.....Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714-1788)
[Largo]
Allegro
Allegro
recorder

Actéon.....Joseph Bodin de Boismortier (1689-1755)
soprano, oboe, basso continuo

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

- T.S. Eliot, from “The Waste Land”

In honor of National Poetry month, we have borrowed Eliot’s opening line as our theme for this April weekend. We are delighted to welcome Kathryn Mueller back to New Mexico for her fourth appearance with ABP, to bring you a program of songs and cantatas of madness, unrequited love, and cruel fate.

Classical mythology provided Baroque composers with a rich trove of material for opera, oratorio and dramatic cantatas, including several of the works on this weekend’s program. We open with Elisabeth

Jacquet de la Guerre's cantata *Semelé*, in which the title character is consumed by flames after demanding to see Jupiter (by whom, Ovid tells us in the *Metamorphoses*, she is pregnant with the god Bacchus) in all his power and glory. It may or may not be significant that, whereas Ovid has a jealous Juno putting the idea into Semele's head, Jacquet de la Guerre's Semele takes it upon herself, in the first air, to persuade her lover to show his face. Bound by a rash promise to grant Semele's every wish, Jupiter does so in an instrumental *bruit* ("noise") that borrows from the operatic convention of the *tempête*, an orchestral depiction of a storm. (Incidentally, the role of the *simphonie*, or instrumental ensemble, is not limited to the depiction of thunder and lightning: the cantata opens with a stately prelude in which treble and bass instruments share thematic material.) Semele celebrates her apparent victory and anticipated fame with an air in the form of a gavotte – but, as the *bruit* resumes and thunderbolts continue to fall, she perishes in the flames. The cantata ends with the singer resuming the role of narrator and commentator: the final air, marked *gracieusement*, warns of the fatal combination of passion and pride – possibly suggesting that Semele is a victim not of cruel fate but of her own ambition.

A somewhat similar and implicitly even more grisly tale plays out in Boismortier's *Actéon*. Diana, the virgin goddess of the hunt, is seen in her bath by an unwitting Actaeon, who has been led to her by fate – or, in Ovid's version, by the Fates. As punishment for gazing on her and her attendants, Diana turns Actaeon into a stag and delivers him to his own huntsmen. Boismortier spares us the bloody aftermath (Ovid does not!) but concludes, as does Jacquet de la Guerre, with a didactic air – although the conclusion, in this instance, is more pragmatic than moralistic. Like all of Boismortier's music, this cantata is tuneful throughout, with the hunting horn, covered in our performance by the oboe, contributing to a pastoral ambience.

Handel's 1707 cantata "Da quel giorno fatale" ("Since that fateful day"), composed in Rome on a text by his patron Benedetto Pamphili, incorporates classical imagery (the descent into Hades and ascent to Elysium) into the conventions of Arcadian, or pastoral, literature that were then fashionable in Rome. The cantata was originally titled "Il delirio amoroso," and the opening recitative suggests that the shepherdess Clori, distraught at Tirsi's rejection of her and grieving his subsequent death, is indeed on the verge of delirium. In the recitative that precedes the aria on our program – we will perform only the aria itself – she has gone down to the underworld to fetch Tirsi and bring him to Elysium, and is shattered at his cruelty in "gazing mockingly" at her and fleeing yet again. In "Per te lasciai la luce," Clori, together with the solo viola da gamba, gives voice to her grief at this second rejection. In the B section of this *da capo* (ABA) aria, the vocal line becomes more angular and fragmented as she questions Tirsi's shade; the viola da gamba maintains the rhythmic motives of the A sections while its melodic contours become less uniform and more harmonically active. As the literal and metaphorical centerpiece of the cantata – it occurs at midpoint and is followed by the ascent to Elysium – this aria is heart-stopping when heard in context, but stands just as well on its own.

Somewhat more loosely connected to classical mythology is Daniel Purcell's song "Morpheus, thou gentle god of soft repose," inserted into Abel Boyer's English translation of Jean Racine's *Iphigénie*. Racine had added Eriphile, daughter of Helen and Theseus, to Euripides' original cast of characters as a rival to Iphigenia for the love of Achilles; this song is given to her. Purcell uses frequent changes of meter, tempo, and affect, as well as text-painting (e.g. on "chase away despair" and, later, on "wild despair"), to show Eriphile's progression from despair and suicidal thoughts to jealousy, rage, and vengeance. Her wish to "sleep and never wake again" is underscored by a persistent descending bass

line; that same device, at a quicker tempo and in shorter note values, conveys a sense of urgency as she recognizes the “tormenting jealousy” that is at the root of her despair. The descending-bass motif, now chromaticized, recurs once again at the word “tortured,” just before Eriphile vows to seek revenge or death.

“Morpheus” clearly fits into the mad-song category: Eriphile, while perhaps not clinically “mad,” is demonstrably a danger to herself and others. Henry Purcell’s “Bess of Bedlam,” on the other hand, reflects a popular fascination with abnormality in general and mental illness in particular. London’s Bethlem Royal Hospital (a.k.a. Bedlam) was something of a tourist attraction during the Restoration era, and visitors could, for a small fee, amuse themselves by tormenting the inmates. The dramatic potential of this fad for madness-as-entertainment was not lost on composers of the era, and the mad-song genre came to embody a set of anti-conventions that set the mad characters apart from the more conventional ones. We’ve already noted the use of text painting, along with changing meters and tempi, in Daniel Purcell’s song. In “Bess” the changes are more frequent and more jarring, as Bess jumps from thought to fragmented thought, accompanied by mercurial shifts in mood. Notice, as well, some wide melodic leaps and unconventional melodic contours and harmonic progressions. It must be admitted that the popularity of mad songs such as this one could be attributed, in part, to an abundance of double-entendres that are largely opaque to us today but which a 17th-century audience would have found highly entertaining, if more than a little cruel!

Restoration England’s fascination with insanity was preceded, during the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages, by a fad for melancholy that was triggered, in part, by fear of reprisals after the defeat of the Armada, wars and revolts at home, the death of Elizabeth, and an epidemic of plague. In any event, according to G.B. Harrison, melancholics, “being humanly proud of their ailments, took care to advertise themselves.” One such sufferer was John Dowland (1562-1622), whose best-known work is his “Lachrimae” (“Tears”) pavane, originally for solo lute and later reworked into the lute song “Flow my tears” and, finally, into the “Lachrimae Antiquae” for viol consort. The “tear motif” of a descending fourth (both stepwise and skipwise) that pervades the tune was picked up by other composers at home and abroad. Among these was the Hamburg violinist Johann Schop, whose own “Lachrimae” pavane for violin and continuo consists of divisions (a type of quasi-improvised variations over a ground bass) on Dowland’s melody. In Schop’s pavane the solo line (performed here on viola da gamba) begins with the unadorned tear motif, and proceeds, over the essentially unchanged bass line of the Lachrimae Antiquae, to elaborate on the tune.

In our other instrumental selection, the sonata for unaccompanied flute (performed here on recorder), Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach synthesizes the various styles that were in play as the Baroque era drew to a close: the contrapuntal writing of his father Johann Sebastian Bach, the lighter, melody-dominated *galant*, and the *Empfindsamerstil*, or “sensitive style.” The illusion of simultaneously-sounding voices within a single line is achieved through abrupt changes in register and dynamics; Bach does this in such a way that the sudden shifts, melodic leaps, and implied harmonies can also express extremes of emotion. The opening *Poco adagio* movement has something of the character of a lament – and, as such, is in keeping with our concert theme.