



## The birth of the madrigal

Sources: Cambridge Guide to Music (ed. Sadie), Wikipedia,  
Music from the Renaissance and Baroque (Susanne Dunlap, Columbia University)

The renaissance period is characterised by a new way of thinking by artists, thinkers, writers, musicians and others. Generally acknowledged as starting in fifteenth century Italy, these scholars all felt that some kind of corner had been turned, that the darkness and the dogmatism of the Middle Ages were passing, that a new era in the history of Man and his awareness was dawning. This new era found much of its inspiration in the ancient classics and their values, hence the idea of 'renaissance' 'rebirth'. Such values were particularly focussed on human beings their individuality and their emotions, as opposed to the medieval preoccupation with the mystical and the divine; the concept of humanism is central to the thinking of the Renaissance.

With this new era of thought, came a reawakened interest in use of the vernacular language (that is to say, the native tongue of Italian). Italian poets began to be aware of the exact sounds of words, as well as their positioning within lines. This formed the start of the poetic form of the madrigal at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The music being written and sung at the time (principally the *frottola* but also the *balletta*, *canzonetta*, and *mascherata*) was light, and typically used verses of relatively low literary quality. These popular music styles used repetition and soprano-dominated chordal textures, styles considerably more simple than those used by the Franco-Flemish composers now being drawn to Italy, attracted by the culture as well as the employment opportunities at the aristocratic courts and ecclesiastical institutions. Literary tastes were changing, and the more advanced verse starting to be produced needed a means of musical expression more flexible and open than was available in the *frottola* and its related forms.

### LISTENING EXAMPLE: A FROTTOLA

*Mal un muta per effecto* Marchetto Cara (1474-1539)  
[Naxos 8.550615, Track 4](#)

The first madrigals were written in Florence, either by native Florentines or by Franco-Flemish musicians in the employ of the supremely powerful Medici family. Even these early madrigals, such as the example below, carefully observed word placement and accent, and even contain the first attempts at word-painting, a feature which was to become characteristic of the later madrigal.

### LISTENING EXAMPLE: AN EARLY MADRIGAL

*Il bianco e dolce cigno* (1539) Jacques Arcadelt  
<http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=BnxgOSIofMg&feature=related>

The invention of moveable type and the printing press revolutionised the world. The wide availability it enabled of printed music meant that this new style of song the madrigal quickly grew in popularity. Composers paid careful attention to the setting of text, and through-composed the music, writing new music for each line of text, rather than using the refrain and verse constructions that were common in French secular music and the *frottola*.



The madrigal continued to develop during the sixteenth century, with composers such as Willaert preferring more complex textures to those of Arcadelt and Verdelot - often his madrigals were similar to motets, with their polyphonic language, although he varied texture between homophonic and polyphonic passages as necessary to highlight the text. Cipriano de Rore was the most influential of the mid-century madrigalists after Willaert. While Willaert was restrained and subtle in his text setting, striving more for homogeneity than sharp contrast, Rore was one to experiment - he used extravagant rhetorical gestures, including word-painting and unusual chromatic relationships. It was from Rore's musical language that madrigalisms, so distinctive of the genre, first came about; and it was also with Rore that five-voice texture became the standard.

LISTENING EXAMPLE: THE DEVELOPING STYLE

*Da le belle contrade d'oriente* Cipriano de Rore

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Italy-1508-1565-Madrigal-contrade-doriente/dp/B001GPWYLG>

Many thousands of madrigals were written in Italy in the 1550s; the entire repertoire is yet to be studied exhaustively. Some famous names of the period, besides Rore, are Palestrina, who wrote some secular music early in his career; the young Orlande de Lassus, who wrote many well-known examples, including the highly experimental and chromatic *Prophetiae Sibyllarum*, and who, on moving to Munich in 1556, began the history of madrigal composition outside of Italy; and Philippe de Monte, the most prolific of all madrigal composers, whose first publication dates from 1554. In style, the madrigals of the 1550s varied from the conservative and elegant style of Palestrina and some of the others working in Rome, to the highly chromatic and expressive work by Lassus, Rore, and others working in the cities of northern Italy.

A further trend in madrigal composition after the mid-sixteenth century was the reincorporation of lighter elements into the form, which so far had been predominantly a serious genre. Where serious verse by poets such as Petrarch had been the standard, and themes of love and longing and death had been typical, by the 1560s composers had begun bringing back elements of some lighter Italian forms, such as the *villanella*, with their dancelike rhythms and verses on carefree subjects. Especially during the late 16th century, composers were ingenious in their use of so-called madrigalisms - passages in which the music assigned to a particular word expresses its meaning, for example, setting *riso* (smile) to a passage of quick, running notes which imitate laughter, or *sospiro* (sigh) to a note which falls to the note below. While this *word painting*' technique originated in secular music, it made its way into other vocal music of the period. Although this mannerism is a prominent feature of madrigals of the late 16th century, including both Italian and English, it encountered sharp criticism from some composers. Thomas Campion, writing in the preface to his first book of lute songs 1601, said of it: where the nature of everie word is precisely expresst in the Note ... such childish observing of words is altogether ridiculous !

LISTENING EXAMPLE: WORD PAINTING

*A un giro sol de belli occhi lucenti* Claudio Monteverdi

Naxos 8.555310, track 11.

A un giro sol de' begl'occhi lucenti  
ride l'aria d'intorno,  
e 'l mar s'acqueta e i venti,  
e si fa il ciel d'un altro lume adorno,  
sol io le luci ho lagrimose e meste.  
Certo quando nasceste  
cosí crudel e ria,  
nacque la morte mia.

One turn of those lovely shining eyes,  
and the air around us laughs,  
the sea is calm, and the winds  
and heaven clothes itself in a new radiance.  
I alone have sad and weeping eyes.  
Certainly when you were born  
so cruel and wicked,  
also was born my death.