

Molza: Music for a Muse

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The ML section of the music library at Yale University sees so little foot traffic that the only light in the room comes from individual shelf lamps that you have to manually turn on yourself. It was in this dusty basement that I first learned about Tarquinia Molza (1542-1617), a prodigious Italian musician, poet, and intellectual. During her lifetime Molza was renowned for her musical abilities as both a virtuosic soprano and viol player as well as for her unrivaled ability to accompany her own singing on the viol. It was these skill sets that eventually earned her a highly paid position at the Este Court in Ferrara. Although rumors of an affair cut Molza's career short, her legacy is preserved in the music she influenced. In curating this program, we've selected pieces connected to Molza's musical life and arranged them for voice and viol, imagining Molza accompanying her own singing.

Our program begins in Modena, Molza's native city. Much of what we know of Molza's pre-professional life comes from *L'amorosa filosofia*, a dialogue by philosopher Francesco Patrizi, her friend and former tutor. In the first half of *L'amorosa filosofia*, Patrizi recounts a gathering of contemporary intellectuals (be it real or imagined). With the intercession of various muses, each man takes a turn praising specific qualities that make Molza a model of excellence, ranging from her physical beauty, to her astonishing intellect, to her musical virtuosity. While, like many dialogues of its time, *L'amorosa filosofia* tends towards flattery and hyperbole, it also contains a wealth of information about Molza and the music that surrounded her.

Patrizi continues to build Molza's ethos with anecdotes in which Molza's talents surpass those of prominent male musicians. We begin our program with a work by one such musician: Alfonso Ferrabosco the Elder's "Zefiro torna." Before Molza, Ferrabosco was considered unrivaled in his ability to sing one line of a madrigal while playing others on the viol. While Ferrabosco would "[resort] to counterpoint" in difficult passages (i.e. invent easier material), Molza could "[remain] true to all the notes."¹ Patrizi also names several prominent male musicians who Molza greatly impressed, such as Pietro Vinci, who was once so taken by the way Molza sang some of his madrigals that he exclaimed, "Oh, daughter, I thank God and then you, for giving me this consolation before my death, to let me hear my compositions sung the way that I would not have believed ever to be able to hear!"² This sentiment is echoed in the text of "Se fosse dolce il canto," which Vinci dedicated to Molza³:

If my hoarse and rough voice
Were in some way sweet,

¹ Patrizi et al., 70

² Patrizi et al., 69

³ Vinci, 5

Even if not sweet enough to please you, kind soul,
From the Ganges to Thule
I would sing your verses, Tarquinia,
Which have immortalized you from India to Persia.

A recurring idea in *L'amorosa filosofia* is Molza's possession of both "feminine" and "masculine" musical skills. Like many noblewomen, Tarquinia excelled at the "feminine" skill of adding florid embellishments to existing vocal lines.⁴ However, she was also highly skilled in the "masculine" art of counterpoint, which, as Patrizi indicates, greatly enhanced her musicianship: "She does so many things, and does them so well—not simply through practice, nor because they were shown to her by her teachers—the way it has happened to women who sing nowadays...but because of her understanding of counterpoint."⁵ These two skill sets intersect in the viola bastarda style, in which the performer must embellish all lines of a madrigal and even add new contrapuntal lines without disturbing the contrapuntal structure of the original piece. It is reasonable to assume that Molza practiced this art, as she likely studied with Orazio Bassani, a viol player famous for his prowess in the viola bastarda style.⁶ We pay homage to this dichotomy of Molza's "masculine" and "feminine" skills with three renditions of Cipriano de Rore's famous madrigal "Anchor che col partire," which Patrizi says he heard her sing:⁷ first, our unadorned voice and viol arrangement; second, the same arrangement with our own pre-composed vocal diminutions; and finally, James's viola bastarda improvisation on this madrigal.

Molza's professional career began in 1582 when the Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso II d'Este, personally invited her to court to serve as Lady in Waiting to his wife Margherita.⁸ Duke Alfonso, who had made numerous trips to Modena, was amazed by Molza's talents, particularly during a performance of "Hor che'l ciel" (likely the setting by Rore)⁹ in which she accompanied her own singing.¹⁰ In Ferrara, her professional responsibilities included collaborating with the *Concerto delle donne*, a group of three female singers and instrumentalists famed for their virtuosity who inspired the creation of similar female ensembles at courts throughout Europe. Although Molza is never listed as one of the group's performers, she was likely their musical advisor and coach.¹¹ The *Concerto delle donne* inspired many well-known composers, and their skills unquestionably influenced the works that we've programmed from Luzzaschi's *Madrigali*

⁴ Patrizi, 40

⁵ Patrizi et al., 69

⁶ Vandelli, 7

⁷ Patrizi, 40

⁸ Riley, 471

⁹ See "Recording Tarquinia: Imitation, Parody and Reportage in Ingegneri's 'Hor che'l ciel e la terra e'l vento tace,'" Laurie Stras

¹⁰ Patrizi, 42

¹¹ Riley, 477

per cantare o sonare a uno, doi, e tre soprani and Wert's *Ottavo libro de madrigali a cinque voci*, whose dedication reads:

And in what part of the world could these be better sung than in Your Highness's court...? ...who does not know today of the marvels of art and nature, the voice, grace, disposition, memory, and other similar and rare qualities of the most noble young ladies of Her Serene Highness, the Duchess of Ferrara? Such considerations alone are sufficient to induce every composer in the world to dedicate his work to Your Highness so that it might receive the true and natural spirit of music from such divine voices and such a noble concerto...¹²

Such works by Wert and Luzzaschi were part of a larger compositional trend known as the "luxuriant madrigal" style. This style, which balances equal-voiced polyphony and florid vocal embellishments in all voices, developed in Ferrara during the 1580's, overlapping with Molza's years as advisor to the *Concerto*. Scholar Joanne Riley suggests that the influence of Molza's "masculine" and "feminine" skills led directly to the development of the luxuriant madrigal style, marking Molza's lasting influence on music history.¹³

Despite all of her professional success, Molza's career came to a halt when she was expelled from court in 1589 due to allegations that she and Wert had had an affair.¹⁴ Molza claimed that their relationship was nothing more than amiable, and that rumors of an affair had been spread by someone named "Vittorio" out of jealousy of her accomplishments. In the 1970s, two musicologists discovered a letter substantiating her claim penned by a Ferrarese courtier that reads, "Signora Tarquinia is leaving court, dismissed by His Highness, and Vittorio remains here in that same lord's service—so that, on all accounts, the Signora's case grieves me."¹⁵

Molza returned to Modena where she remained active among a circle of artists and intellectuals until her death in 1617. In 1601 she even became the first woman to be named an Honorary Citizen of Rome.¹⁶ Perhaps no artistic output better preserves Molza's legacy as a musician, poet, and intellectual than madrigals with texts written by her or in her honor. Today we are lucky to have at least 17 fully extant madrigals on such texts. Our program concludes with three pieces that set Molza's poems, including one by the renowned composer G.P. Palestrina, and another piece on a text in her honor by one of the most famous poets in the history of Italian literature, Tarquato Tasso.

Though Molza and her accomplishments have largely been forgotten, we're proud to bring her story out of the library and into the concert hall.

¹² MacClintock, viii

¹³ Riley, 479

¹⁴ Riley, 471

¹⁵ Riley, 484

¹⁶ Riley, 471

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