

When James first began taking viol lessons, he was excited to learn from his teacher that there is a long history of accompanying a single voice with a single viol. As students interested in early music, we were used to seeing vocal soloists accompanied by plucked or keyboard, but learning about this history of viol accompaniment took us by surprise. Lyracle grew out of our desire to explore this forgotten historical performance practice.

Most of the historical evidence for the practice of accompanying a solo voice with a single viol is not in the form of notated music, so we quickly learned that finding repertoire for one voice and one viol would only get us so far. Instead, much of our research investigates the question “who throughout history made music in this manner?” This led us to Tarquinia Molza.

Tarquinia was born to an affluent and reputable family in the northern Italian city of Modena (best known today for balsamic vinegar and Ferrari cars). Her prodigious intellect was obvious from a young age. Her father permitted her to receive the same education as her brothers and hired the finest tutors to teach her. One of those tutors was the philosopher Francesco Patrizi, who wrote a treatise about her titled *L'amorosa filosofia*, or *Philosophy of Love*. While *L'amorosa filosofia* tends towards flattery and hyperbole, it also contains a wealth of information about Tarquinia’s musical and intellectual life, including her unrivaled ability to accompany her own singing on the viol.

In *L'amorosa filosofia*, Patrizi includes an anecdote in which Tarquinia’s ability to accompany her own singing on the viol surpasses that of the previously unrivaled Alfonso Ferraboso I. Patrizi’s murky description of just how Ferabosco and Tarquinia execute this difficult task leaves plenty of room for interpretation and imagination. Other historical sources offer little guidance. Silvestro Ganassi’s *Regola rubertina*, published the year Tarquinia was born, provides one page of vague advice and one example of a madrigal arranged for one voice and one viol (the original madrigal is lost, limiting the usefulness of the example). In curating this program, we’ve selected pieces connected to Tarquinia’s musical life and arranged them for one voice and one viol, imagining Tarquinia accompanying her own singing.

To the best of our knowledge, Tarquinia was not a composer. However, she was a poet.

We begin the program with six pieces composed by her contemporaries that evidence her musical and intellectual renown. The first three pieces are all musical settings of her poetry, including one surprising setting of her vernacular love poem “Eran le vostre lagrime” by the famous G.P. Palestrina, who is remembered for his enormous corpus of liturgical music.

The second set of three pieces feature texts written in Tarquinia’s honor. These include “Se fosse dolce il canto” by the little-known Pietro Vinci, who, Patrizi tells us, upon hearing Tarquinia sing some of his compositions 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!” We continue with “Mentre mia stella miri,” a text by Tarquinia’s friend Tarquato Tasso (who also happened to be one of the most famous poets of the 16th century). Thanks to Professor Emiliano Ricciardi and his team at the [Tasso in Music project](#), we know of 16 musical settings of this beautiful poem.

We conclude this set with the North American premiere (to the best of our knowledge) of “Cantate o nove alme.” Composed for five voices, half of the original parts have been lost, but in 2022 scholar Gabirele Taschetti discovered another source for those missing parts, making it possible to share this piece with audiences today.

While Tarquinia may not have been a composer in the sense that we define “composer” today, she did excel at a closely related skill: improvisation. To pay homage to this ability, we programmed three renditions of “Anchor che col partire,” a song that Patrizi heard Tarquinia perform and one of the greatest hits of the 16th century: first, our unadorned voice and viol arrangement; second, the same arrangement with our own pre-composed vocal embellishments; and finally, James’s improvisation in the “viola bastarda” style, a kind of 16th century virtuosic embellishment whose champions included one of Tarquinia’s likely teachers, Orazio Bassani.

We follow “Anchor che col partire” with another text that we know Tarquinia sang, “Hor ch’il ciel et la terra tace.” There are many musical settings of this Petrarchan sonnet, and we selected one by a composer that Tarquinia was familiar with: Cipriano de Rore, the composer of “Anchor che col partire.” Regardless of whose composition she actually sang, her ability to deliver this sonnet in song catalyzed her professional musical career.

In 1568 Duke Alfonso d’Este came to visit Modena from the nearby city of Ferrara. During his visit, Tarquinia performed Rore’s “Hor ch’il ciel et la terra tace” for him. He was reportedly so delighted that he had her repeat it 6 times! When Tarquinia’s husband died several years later and it became socially acceptable for her to become employed, Alfonso invited her to join his court, where there is ample evidence that music was a large component of her professional responsibilities.

Tarquinia’s employment began in 1583. A position at Alfonso’s court in Ferrara was one of the most exciting gigs a musician could land. Under his patronage, Ferrara in the 1580s was a hotbed of musical innovation. It seems that one of Tarquinia’s responsibilities at court was coaching and advising the *Concerto delle donne*, a group of three female singers and instrumentalists famed for their virtuosity. This ensemble inspired the creation of similar groups at courts throughout Europe, and many composers wrote to showcase the concerto’s skill sets. We’ve included two such compositions (“Fra le dorate chiome” and “Cor mio, deh non languire”) by Giaches de Wert and Luzzasco Luzzaschi, respectively, published in song books that specifically reference the concerto in their dedications, making it clear that these pieces were composed with the concerto’s talents in mind.

Despite her most prestigious employment at a time when very few women were professional musicians, Tarquinia’s career came to a halt when she was expelled from court in 1589 due to allegations of an affair between herself and Giaches de Wert. Some of Tarquinia and Wert’s correspondences still exist, and today, what some read as love letters, others read as platonic affection between two friends and musical colleagues.

Tarquinia and Wert both denied the allegations, and Tarquinia blamed another minor court musician named Vittorio, who she claimed started rumors out of jealousy. In the 1970s, two musicologists discovered a letter penned by a count in Ferrara in reference to her expulsion substantiating her claim. It 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.”

Tarquinia was only 47 when she was expelled from court, and she lived to the age of 74. She returned to her family home in Modena, where her correspondences were surveilled for the rest of her life. While the first 47 years of her life are astonishingly well documented for her time, we know almost nothing about her life post-career. A high point came in 1600, when she became the first woman in history to be given the honorary title “Citizen of Rome.” Our only clue about her daily life comes from a letter from the governor of Modena reporting back to Duke Alfonso shortly after her expulsion that says: “Lady Tarquinia stays in her mother's house, where she sings with the people of Modena daily.”

In the last set of six pieces we imagine Tarquinia making music with friends gathered in her Modena home. Since we don't know exactly what they sang and played, we chose music that was published and sold commercially during Tarquinia's lifetime. We're delighted to welcome soprano Margaret Carpenter Haigh and bass-baritone Nathan Halbur to join us for this portion of the program.

When we presented our original program on Tarquinia in 2020, we only focused on her documented achievements, but she didn't stop being an excellent musician after she was expelled from court. The years that she spent making music in community with the people of Modena and welcoming them into her home is as worthy of celebration as any professional achievement. Tarquinia's story is one that we hope will help us all reconsider what kind of historic and contemporary music making experiences we as a society choose to celebrate.

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