Program Notes 5/7/2009

The title of tonight's program comes from Shakespeare's romantic comedy As You Like It. As the clown Touchstone and his country lass Audrey rejoice at their impending wedding, two page boys serenade them with the song that also begins tonight's concert. This happy scene takes place in the idyllic world of the Forest of Arden, removed from the problems of city life—a world in which love longings can be rewarded and where (to borrow from another of Shakespeare's titles) "All's well that ends well." Such a play shows Shakespeare at the height of his powers to craft pure (though not shallow) entertainment, which—at least in this particular form of art—is its own highest objective.
Nor is it mere coincidence that most of the songs on tonight's program reflect the broader tradition from which Touchstone and Audrey's prenuptial serenade is drawn: the type of song called the madrigal. The word "madrigal" comes from the Italian matricale, which literally means "of the womb" but more figuratively meant a pastoral song in the "mother" tongue (not Latin but the vernacular). Madrigals arose near 1300 in the time of Dante's championing both of the Italian language and of lyric poetry that elevated human love to near-divine status. The best-known examples of madrigal form, however, date from the early 1500's through the early 1600's, spreading from Italy throughout Western Europe and Britain (thus influencing Shakespeare). The influence of madrigal form can be heard in nearly every work on tonight's concert (sometimes in surprising ways). Like Shakespeare's happier romantic comedies, madrigals are designed purely to entertain, but that does not necessarily exclude deeper or more sobering themes. Ultimately, each listener has the freedom to find meaning in each piece as both Shakespeare's title and we of Griffin Choral Arts invite: "As You Like It."
We also welcome our guests tonight, the Vega Quartet, in residence at Emory University. What more appropriate collaborators in presenting love songs that pluck at universal heart strings! The trademark of string quartet music is its intimate communication among the instruments--a perfect counterpart to the intimacy of the composition for human voices represented in tonight's choral selections.
It Was a Lover and His Lass
Thomas Morley (1557? -1602)
It was a lover and his lass (with a hey, and a ho, and a hey nony no)
That o'er the green cornfields did pass,
In Spring time, the only pretty ring time,
When birds do sing hey ding a ding a ding;
Sweet lovers love the spring.
Then, pretty lovers, take the time,
For love is crownèd with the prime
In Spring time, the only pretty ring time,
When birds do sing hey ding a ding a ding;
Sweet lovers love the spring.
This song may sound laughable, as do many madrigals to the modern ear--hence such classic modern parodies as Peter Shickele's (PDQ Bach's) "My Bonny Lass, She Smelleth, Making the Flowerth Jealouth." Even Shakespeare meant the song as a joke: a wedding ("ring time") serenade sung by two smart-alecky school boys to a clown (a classic Shakespearean Fool) and his "lady." The only "meanings" necessary to derive are the pleasure of the joke and the giddy joy of the music itself, heard especially in the counterpointing of the vocal lines.
Thomas Morley, a student of William Byrd, was a musician in the Church of England, but his main renown came as the leading English composer of the sunnier style of madrigal. It is possible that he not only lived in the same parts of London with Shakespeare and his thespic cohorts but also may even have written this famous madrigal at the Bard's request for insertion into As You Like It.
Come Again! Sweet Love Doth Now Invite
John Dowland (1563-1626?)
Come again! Sweet love doth now invite
Thy graces that refrain to do me due delight,
To see, to hear, to touch, to kiss, to die
With thee again in sweetest sympathy.
Come again! That I may cease to mourn
Through thy unkind disdain. For now left and forlorn
I sit, I sigh, I weep, I faint, I die
In deadly pain and endless misery.
Today, John Dowland is better known as the foremost lute player of this time, but he was also an accomplished and popular lyricist. The two stanzas from "Come Again!" in tonight's selection perfectly illustrate the sublime artificiality of madrigal lyrics, which usually took one of two main forms: a sunnier, "light" style or a more "serious" style, the latter of which Thomas Morley and others sometimes differentiated as a "motet" rather than a "madrigal"—though this distinction was itself rather artificial in practice. In hearing the first stanza, Dowland's audience would have chuckled at the bawdy double-entendre of the words (especially that "die" in Elizabethan English often meant achieving the ultimate "sweetest sympathy" in lovemaking). The closing stanza, by contrast, illustrates the affected postures of melancholia fashionable at the time (Shakespearean examples: Hamlet, the "melancholy Dane" and the self-styling "melancholy Jaques" in As You Like It).
The Silver Swan
Orlando Gibbons (1583?-1625)
The silver swan, who living had no note,
When death approached unlocked her silent throat;

Leaning her breast against the reedy shore,
Thus sung her first and last, and sung no more;
Farewell all joys, O death come close mine eyes;
More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise.
This is another example of the stylized melancholy of the more somber style of madrigal. Its sadness is also that of the mythic “Swan Song”: the ancient belief that swans are mute until a time near death when they sing one final, beautiful song.
Orlando Gibbons was one of the most versatile and accomplished composers in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Of special interest in “The Silver Swan” is not only Gibbons’ mastery of counterpoint (a trademark of the best madrigals in general) but also the fact that its melody line (typically in the soprano) is uncommon for its independence from the voice lines below (Gibbons probably having composed the melody originally for solo voice accompanied by a consort of viols). The Italian madrigals that Gibbons used as sources depict a (more realistic) white swan. The mere fact that Gibbons colors his swan silver indicates the high priority that English madrigalists placed on the aesthetic value of artificiality: the elegance of the imaginary “artifice” that the composer’s talent was capable of constructing.
Too Much I Once Lamented
Thomas Tomkins (1572-1656)
Too much I once lamented,
While love my heart tormented.
Alas, Ay me, and sat I wringing,
Now chanting go, and singing fa la la . . . .
As a YouTube commentator aptly observed in describing a King’s Singers rendition of this madrigal, “Fantastic. Beautiful. Creepy. Perfect.” Yet another example of the melancholy type of madrigal, “Too Much I Once Lamented” is all the more remarkable for its inclusion of the traditional “fa la la” nonsense syllables—cementing the claim that we dare not expect the Renaissance madrigal to make “normal” psychological sense but instead simply enjoy its purely musical pleasures. This particular madrigal, written for SSATB, further enhances texture by requiring the two soprano parts to exchange lines in the final repeat.
Born in Wales, Thomas Tomkins served church music posts that brought him under the influence of both William Byrd and Thomas Morley. In fact, Tomkins dedicated this particular madrigal “to my ancient and much reverenced master, William Byrd.”
Elegischer Gesang (Elegiac Song), Op. 118
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
What is most remarkable about this exquisite piece is its near-invisibility. It is rarely performed or even mentioned among Beethoven’s works—perhaps because the piece is so short and the list of famous pieces by this iconic composer is so long. In any case, it is a rare privilege for both Griffin Choral Arts and for the Vega Quartet to join forces in performing it.
The literal meaning of the term “elegy” is “song of mourning.” Beethoven completed this piece for string quartet and four voice parts (SATB) as a gift to one of his patrons, the Baron Johann von Pasqualati, whose wife, Eleanore (or Eleonore), had died in childbirth in 1811, at the age of 24. The first performance (by a vocal quartet and string quartet) took place in the Pasqualati home in 1814. Although the author of the text is unknown, it may have been the widower-Baron himself.
Sanft wie du lebtest hast du vollendet, zu heilig für den Schmerz!
Kein Auge wein’ ob des himmlischen Geistes Heimkehr.(Softly as you lived you have reached your end, too holy for pain!No eye should weep over the return home of a heavenly spirit).
So touching are the personal connections that inspired the creation of this love song that further conjecture about its place in Beethoven’s life and career is tempting. For one thing, the name of the departed wife, Eleanore, is a variant upon the most prominent female name in Beethoven’s musical output: Leonore (Leonora, in English). In fact, Beethoven published the final version of his only opera, Fidelio--whose heroine is named Leonora--in 1814, the same year the Elegischer Gesang was first performed. Although earlier versions of Fidelio date to 1805, it is possible that the death of Eleanore von Pasqualati may have contributing further context for Beethoven’s final revision of his Leonora opera. Also of interest is the fact that the subtitle of Fidelio is “The Triumph of Married Love.” Beethoven’s own longings for the marital estate had also increased in the decade or so immediately preceding the composition of the Pasqualati Elegy. His letters to the famously mysterious “Immortal Beloved” are dated by many biographers to the period 1811-1812. While causal connections among these biographical coincidences cannot be drawn with certainty, their circumstantial confluence at a time when Beethoven wrote such a deeply-felt, surpassingly beautiful music-poem on the subject of the loss of a dearly beloved wife cannot be entirely discounted. Perhaps again significantly, the fact that the heroine of Fidelio lives to triumph may have heightened the pathos of the death of Pasqualati’s young wife. Beethoven’s optimism at the triumph of an ideal--the “Eternal Feminine”-- could only in part assuage the grief he shared with his patron at the loss of a real human life-mate, whose death could, at best, be immortalized in the beauty of a “singing to heaven.”
In the opening of the ABA-structured elegy Beethoven may have borrowed from his own Second Piano Concerto’s slow movement to craft the chordal, hymn-like theme initiated by the strings and then repeated in the choral “Sanft wie du lebtest.” Such self-borrowing (common for composers well into the nineteenth century), however, diminishes neither the beauty nor the touching appropriateness of his gift to his grieving friend and benefactor. The pain of “Schmerz” is stressed in loud, shocking minor chords on the repetitions of the word. The “B” fugal section transitions through modal/minor passages to convey the words “Kein Auge wein’” but abruptly emphasizes the “homecoming” of the blessed spirit (the “himmlischen Geistes Heimkehr”) in assertive A major and even more dramatic D major chords. Significantly, the return to the “A” section at the end entirely omits reference to “Schmerz,” instead reasserting “vollendet”—not just “died” but a death more beautifully “fulfilled”—to which Beethoven even adds a conclusively affirmative “ja.” Also remarkable about the musical setting

is its anticipation of the later romanticism of Brahms, with the choral raptures and heartfelt “joy-through-tears” of the Deutsches Requiem coming most readily to mind.
 Concerto No. 1 in E Major, Op. 8, RV 269, “La primavera” (Spring)From Le quattro stagioni (The Four Seasons)
Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)
Composers of the European Renaissance and even early Baroque took pride in their tone painting: their choices of musical effects to imitate details of the real world.
No more famous examples of this style can be found than Vivaldi’s famous four violin concertos collectively named the Four Seasons, the first of which, “Spring,” is shared with us tonight by the Vega Quartet.
Like its companion pieces in the Four Seasons, “Spring” consists of three movements, in the sequence fast (Allegro), slow (Largo), fast (Allegro). Even though it is for instruments alone, the concerto nonetheless depicts a “program” in the form of a pastoral ode to Spring, in all likelihood composed by Vivaldi himself (quite likely in describing a painting or other visual art work depicting the idealized scenes mentioned).
Allegro
Springtime is upon us. The birds celebrate her return with festive song, and murmuring streams are softly caressed by the breezes. Thunderstorms, those heralds of Spring, roar, casting their dark mantle over heaven. Then they die away to silence, and the birds take up their charming songs once more.
Largo
On the flower-strewn meadow, with leafy branches rustling overhead, the goat-herd sleeps, his faithful dog beside him.
Allegro
Led by the festive sound of rustic bagpipes, nymphs and shepherds lightly dance beneath the brilliant canopy of Spring.
(Translation found at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Four_Seasons_Sonnets)
This concerto’s key of E major is even significant in that, being one of the keys most compatible with the normal tuning of stringed instruments, the exuberance of the music almost seems to spring forth “naturally” from the very structure of the instruments themselves.
Sometimes surprising is the knowledge that Vivaldi--composer of such famous secular, even “pagan,” pieces-- was a Christian priest (in fact, nicknamed the “Red Priest” for his reddish hair). Yet Renaissance philosophy and art saw no contradiction in including even “pagan” mythological personages and settings within the marvelous expanse of Creation in Christian cosmology. (In more modern times, the fiction of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien testify to this Renaissance aesthetic.)
 Erev Shel Shoshanim (“Evening of Roses”)
Music by Josef (Yosef) Hadar
Lyrics by Moshe Dor
Arrangement by Jack Klebanow
This piece bears the subtitle “A Sensitive Portrait of the Israeli Desert . . . and Love.” The sheet music provides further description of the arrangement: “It truly creates the open feeling of the desert at night while the scent of roses drifts on the cool air.” The choral structure is surprisingly madrigal-like, though assigning the melody more often to the Alto than to the Soprano. Although sounding like an anonymous ancient Hebrew folksong, both the music and the lyrics (adapted from the biblical Song of Songs) were composed in 1956.
Erev shel shonanim / Neytsena habustan
Shachar homa yona / Roshech maley t’lalimChorus: Laila yored shoshan noshva / Hava elchash lach shir balat / Zemer shel ahava. Let us go out to the grove / Myrrh, fragrant spices and incense are a threshold for your feet.Dawn, a dove is cooing. Your head is filled with dew. / Your mouth is a rose unto the morning. I will pick it for myself.Chorus: Night falls slowly / and the wind of roses is blowing. / Let me whisper you a song, secretly—a song of love. “Five Hebrew Love Songs” (arranged for SATB and string quartet)
Eric Whitacre (1970-)
The origin of this piece by contemporary Wunderkind Eric Whitacre is described by the composer himself in the preface to the performing edition:
In the spring of 1996, my great friend and brilliant violinist Friedemann Eichhorn invited me and my girlfriend-at-the-time Hila Plitmann (a soprano) to give a concert with him in his home city of Speyer, Germany. We had all met that year as students at the Juilliard School, and were inseparable. Because we were appearing as a band of traveling musicians, “Friedy” asked me to write a set of troubadour songs for piano, violin, and soprano. I asked Hila (who was born and raised in Jerusalem) to write me a few “postcards” in her native tongue, and a few days later she presented me with these exquisite and delicate Hebrew poems. . . . .
Each of the songs captures a moment that Hila and I shared together. “Kalá Kallá” (which means “light bride”) was a pun I came up with while she was first teaching me Hebrew. The bells at the beginning of “Eyze Shelleg” are the exact pitches that awakened us each morning in Germany as they rang from a nearby cathedral. These songs are profoundly personal for me, born entirely out of my new love for this soprano, poet, and now wife, Hila Plitmann.
Tonight’s arrangement for mixed-voice chorus and string quartet was published in 2002.
The opening movement, “Temuná” (A picture), sows the seeds from which virtually all of the rest of the five-part song cycle blossoms. The open-chord harmonies and tentative, dance-like barcarole rhythms—especially the subtle use of the hemiola device of juxtaposing 3 beats against 2 (even more prominent in the piano version)—depict the delicately balanced movements--emotional and physical--of two individual lovers approaching each other in a paradoxical tension of eagerness and reserve. The opening movement, for female voices only, establishes a loving distance from which one lover (the woman in this case) cherishes a simple visual impression of her beloved.
Temuná belibi charutá: / Nodédet beyn ór uveyn ófel:

Min dmamá shekazó et guféech kach otá / Usaréch al paná'ich kach nófel.(A picture is engraved in my heart; / Moving between light and darkness:
A sort of silence envelopes your body, / And your hair falls upon your face just so.)
The second movement, "Kalá kallá" (Light bride), continues in barcarole rhythm (which itself recalls the romantic rocking of the famous Venetian canal boats and their gondoliers' song). The men's voices begin in a slow serenade. The women's voices answer, perhaps teasingly, in a quicker, lively dance, in alternating measures of double- and triple-time (a variation on the 3-against-2 motif) adding tambourine accompaniment. Eventually the women draw closer to their wooers, singing their own variation upon the men's original serenade. Finally both men and women sing together, in madrigal-like "la la" nonsense syllables, climaxing in a furiously (con fuoco) wordless ending, suggesting the heightened expectations of both bride and groom.
Kalá kallá Kulá sheli, la la . . . . / U'vekalút Tishák hili!(Light bride, she is all mine, / And lightly she will kiss me!)
The title of the fourth movement, "Lárov" (Mostly), is a double pun. Rather than "mostly," it is the "least" (shortest) of the five songs. Further, its brevity highlights a spatial joke: the lovers' intimacy brought the endless distances of the universe down to a single centimeter of space. The difference between these two perspectives is suggested by harmonic alternations between intervals of fourths and fifths in the arpeggiated accompaniment.
"Lárov," amár gag la'shama'im, / "Hamerchák shebeynéynu hu ad;
Ach lifnéyzman alulechán shna'im, / Uveynéynu nishár sentiméter echad."("Mostly," said the roof to the sky, "the distance between you and I is endlessness;But a while ago two came up here, and only one centimeter was left between us.")
Movement Four, "Éyze shéleg!" (What snow!), uses aleatoric (random) effects such as non-measured time and non-verbal vocal sounds to convey the impression of snow falling and the intensity of the lovers' focus upon it. Also prominent are the church-bell tones spoken of by the composer in his preface. Of special interest is the string quartet accompaniment, in some ways echoing the "Winter" concerto from Vivaldi's Four Seasons in its use of plucked violin strings to suggest the fall of snowflakes and tremolo to suggest shivering.
Éyze shéleg! / Kmo chalomót ktanim / Noflim mehashamá'im
(What snow! / Like little dreams / Falling from the sky.)
The concluding movement, "Rakút" (Tenderness), madrigal-like in structure, is beautifully simple, with an ending virtually identical to the beginning of the first song: the delicate minor-key open chards and the gently dancelike barcarolle rhythm, again including the hemiola variation, with its emphasis upon the surprising three-against-two rhythm—suggesting that the complex delicacy of the love relationship persists even into the couple's life together. The focus on the human couple is emphasized early in the movement by having the highest and lowest instruments in the string quartet (first violin and 'cello) play the female and male roles in parallel octaves echoing the vocal melody.
Hu hayá male rakút; / Hi haytá kasha. / Vechól káma shenistá lehishér kach,
Pashút, uvlí sibá tová, / Lakách otá el toch atzmó, / Veheníach Bamakóm ha chi rach.(He was full of tenderness; / She was very hard. / And as much as she tried to stay thus,Simply, and with no good reason, / He took her into himself, / And set her down in the softest, softest place.) \
As Vesta Was from Latmos Hill Descending
Thomas Weelkes (1576?-1623)
This famous madrigal (for six voice parts: SSATTB) by well-known composer of both sacred and secular music Thomas Weelkes is a textbook example of the madrigal's penchant for word- (or tone-) painting: the use of musical devices in direct imitation of the action or emotion being expressed in the lyrics. The story told in the song is simple: the pagan goddess Vesta (source of the legends about the Vestal Virgins, who guarded the sacred fires in the temple of Diana) was descending Latmos Hill, only to be left isolated when her attendants flock to the "maiden Queen" ascending that same hill. The allegory to the "Virgin Queen" Elizabeth Tudor is obvious, and the song concludes with a nearly endless paean to "Oriana"—a more singable variation on perhaps the most famous adulatory nickname for Elizabeth: Gloriana. The word-painting is unmistakable, with examples such as melodic lines moving quickly down the scale to imitate "Diana's darlings . . . running down amain," and numerous similar "visual sound effects."
As Vesta was from Latmos hill descending, she spied a maiden Queen the same ascending,
Attended on by all the shepherds' swain, to whom Diana's darlings came running down amain,
First two by two, then three by three together, leaving their goddess all alone, hasted thither;
And mingling with the shepherds of her train, with mirthful tunes, her presence entertain.
Then sang the shepherds and nymphs of Diana: Long live fair Oriana.
April Is in My Mistress' Face
Thomas Morley (1557? -1602)
This is an even simpler and more jewel-like madrigal by master of the form Thomas Morley (see notes above to "It Was a Lover and His Lass"). Also interesting is that Morley's brief lyric compresses a "four seasons" motif, yet another reprise in tonight's concert (along with the "Snow" movement in Whitacre) of Vivaldi's musical metaphor in his famous "seasonal" grouping of violin concerti.
April is in my mistress' face, and July in her eyes hath place.
Within her bosom is September, but in her heart, a cold December.
Fair Phyllis I Saw
John Farmer (1570?-1605)
Though lesser-known than his Elizabethan fellows Morley, Gibbons, and Weelkes, John Farmer was an accomplished composer of both sacred and secular music. "Fair Phyllis I Saw" is another often-cited example of word-painting, for example beginning the madrigal with a solo to emphasize Phyllis' loneliness in ". . . sitting all alone."
Fair Phyllis I saw sitting all alone, feeding her flock near the mountainside,

The shepherds knew not whither she was gone, but after her lover Amyntas hied.
Up and down he wandered whilst she was missing; when he found her, O, then they fell a-kissing.
Again, if to modern ears the combination of this lyric with these stylized musical effects sounds amusing, it is also possible that Farmer consciously played up a more lighthearted side to the Greek legend of the Phyllis who commits suicide despairing that her lover will not return. Farmer may also have chosen his Phyllis and Amyntas merely from the stock of pastoral, quasi-mythological stereotypes common to music, poetry, and dramatic masques fashionable at the time—thus illustrating that this madrigal is yet another masterpiece of high artifice, not only in its choice of subject and in its word-painting but also in its nonchalant-seeming subordination of syllable-accents to the overarching beauty of the musical counterpoint.

And So It Goes
Billy Joel (1949-)
A fitting conclusion to tonight's concert emphasizing the madrigal and songs of love is the surprise that "Piano Man's" well-known pop song is a kind of modern madrigal (with a British or Gaelic folksong flavor), both in musical structure and in subject matter (of the "melancholy" love-lost mode)--even replete with the traditional nonsense syllables in the refrain.
The song's title echoes the stoic refrain from Kurt Vonnegut's acerbic 1969 novel Slaughterhouse-Five (whose protagonist's name, Billy Pilgrim, no doubt resonated with the like-named composer). Although Joel wrote "And So It Goes" in 1983 at the break-up of a relationship, the song's popularity came at its recorded release in 1989. The 1999 musical arrangement sung tonight is by Bob Chilcott (1955-), a founding member of the King's Singers but now on his own as a choral arranger of international renown. Like the Beethoven elegy, "And So It Goes"--while genuinely lamenting a lost love--reassures us of the timeless therapeutic power of musical beauty.
In every heart there is a room, a sanctuary safe and strong,
To heal the wounds from lovers past, until a new one comes along.
I spoke to you in cautious tones; you answered me with no pretense.
And I still feel I said too much. My silence is my self-defense.
And every time I've held a rose it seems I only felt the thorns.
And so it goes and so it goes, and so will you soon I suppose.
And if my silence made you leave, then that would be my worst mistake.
So I will share this room with you. And you can have this heart to break.
And this is why my eyes are closed; it's just as well, for all I've seen.
And so it goes and so it goes, and you're the only one who knows.
So I would choose to be with you, that's if the choice were mine to make.
But you can make decisions, too. And you can have this heart to break.
Doo doo doo doo . . . .
And so it goes and so it goes, and you're the only one who knows.
Notes and German translations by Bill Pasch