

Labyrinth Baroque Ensemble

Secret Music

Three celestial sopranos

Tracy Cowart, Mezzo-soprano
 Sian Ricketts and Elena Mullins, Sopranos
 Rachel Evans, David McCormick, Boel Gidholm, Violins
 Richard Kolb, Theorbo and Archlute
 Hsuan-Wen Chen, harpsichord
 Alice Robbins, Violone

Suite of dances from *Il Scolaro*
Dalle celeste sfere

Gasparo Zanetti (fl. c. 1625-1650)
 Antonio Archilei (1543-1612)

Sonata con 3 violini
Quando l'alba in oriente

G. B. dalla Fontana (d.c. 1630)
 Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643)

Corrente prima
O dolcezz'amarissime d'Amore
Corrente X
Non sa che sia dolore

Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583-1643)
 Luzzasco Luzzaschi (c.1545-1607)
 Alessandro Piccinini (1566-c.1638)
 Luzzasco Luzzaschi

Intermission

Sonata à 3 violini in echo
Noi siamo tre donzellempette

Biagio Marini (1594-1663)
 Luigi Rossi (1597-1653)

Sonata 15 à 4
Fan battaglia i miei pensieri

Dario Castello (fl. c 1620-1650)
 Luigi Rossi

Program notes

During the 1570s the culturally enlightened Duke Alfonso II of Ferrara established at his court an ensemble of women musicians that initiated a radical change in the soundscape of Western music. Alfonso called his prized ensemble the *Concerto delle donne*, and its members were brilliantly talented young women rigorously trained from childhood to perform music composed to feature virtuosic female voices singing with powerful emotional expression, a strikingly new kind of music at the time. These were among the first professional women singers in European history, and besides the stunning novelty of their performances the fame they acquired began a trend that revolutionized forever women's role in music.

The Duke reserved the performances of his *Concerto delle donne* for his "Secret Music," heard only by members of the inner circle of his court and important visitors by special invitation. In order to enhance the aura of secrecy surrounding the novel ensemble, the musical scores composed by the ensemble's director Luzzasco Luzzaschi and other leading composers were carefully guarded. Indeed, maintaining an aura of secrecy was the best means of insuring the spread of the ensemble's fame and prestige, and soon the heavenly voices (and alluring charms) of the ensemble's members became legendary in all of Europe, bringing international prestige to Alfonso and his court. Imitations of the *Concerto delle donne* were soon established in Florence and Rome, and soon after in many other centers.

The leading singers in the *Concerto delle donne*, which included Laura Peverara, Livia d'Arco, and Anna Guarini, became famous for their virtuosic and expressive solos, but the ensemble's most distinctive music featured the three sopranos singing together in closely intertwined counterpoint. These were the crowning glory of their performances, combining the tradition of the Renaissance madrigal with the newly emerging expressiveness of the Baroque *Stile rappresentativo*. The three-soprano texture produces a unique timbre that was described as celestial or divine, and at the same time powerfully erotic.

On the death of Duke Alfonso in 1597 the *Concerto delle donne* was disbanded, and this permitted Luzzaschi to publish some of the "secret" music he had composed for the ensemble, thus prolonging its fame well into the seventeenth century. While Luzzaschi's style soon came to be considered old fashioned, the unique effectiveness of his trios sustained their influence on later composers. Luigi Rossi, one of leading composers of the 1630s and 40s, composed a number of striking pieces that emulate Luzzaschi's trios, masterfully incorporating the brilliance of mid-seventeenth century bel canto style within the polyphonic texture. In his *Noi siamo tre donzette* three young women gossip about the men they flirt with, in an elegantly woven operatic scene that features each character in solo arias as well as in remarkably beautiful trios.

A preference for the high-pitched sound of soprano voices was a general characteristic of the Baroque period, and this carried over to instrumental music as well. The violin and cornetto became favored melody instruments because of their ability to play with extreme flexibility and virtuosity in the high register, emulating the capabilities of the soprano voice. Our program includes sonatas by Giovanni Battista Dalla Fontana, Biagio Marini, and Dario Castello, who found ingenious ways of adapting the ethereal sound of three high voices to instrumental textures.