

Madrigals

Madrigals first appeared in Italy in the 16th Century and became popular with English, French, German, and Spanish composers. They are secular compositions for two or more voices, and were often based on pre-existing texts.

In the early stages, madrigals had melody in the highest part and were generally written for four voices. However, voice parts were occasionally played by or doubled by instruments. Later composers began to use more compositional techniques, such as chromaticism, to match the music to the text. Noted composers of madrigals in the early stages were the Dutch Jakob Arcadelt and the Flemish Philippe Verdelot, though during the 16th century there were close to 600 composers working in Italy.

As time progressed, composers began to introduce more voices, preferring the richer textures created by five or six parts. The Flemish Adrian Willaert, Philippe de Monte, and Orlando di Lasso (1532-1594) are considered to be the best composers of madrigals at this stage. Di Lasso's last work, *Lagrima di San Pietro* (Tears of St Peter), was a collection of madrigals with religious texts that showed his versatility at handling both sacred and secular genres.

As the 17th Century began, composers such as Monteverdi and Gesualdo began to start a transition from polyphonic madrigals to solo songs and duets. These were often intensely emotional and featured some striking harmony. Monteverdi entitled this style the *seconda prattica*. This caused much controversy among traditional music theorists such as Artusi.

Gesualdo wrote six volumes of five-part madrigals and is best known for his dramatic and innovative use of harmony and dissonance. Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) was one of the most important composers in the transition from Renaissance to Baroque music, and was also one of the pioneers of opera. He wrote five books of madrigals, drawing influences from such composers as Morenzo and Giaches de Wert.

The collection of Italian madrigals translated into English, *Musica Transalpina*, served as a catalyst to the development of English madrigals. William Byrd (c. 1543-1623), Thomas Morley (1557-1603), John Wilbye (1574-1638), Thomas Weelkes and Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625) are seen as the most significant composers in the genre.

Byrd was one of the greatest English composers of the Elizabethan age. He composed well in most genres, and his music was often polyphonic. Morley played a crucial role in the establishment of the madrigal in England. Wilbye wrote 60 madrigals in two volumes; his sensitivity to the text, and control of texture are shown in such works as "Adew, sweet Amarillis" (1598) and "Draw on sweet night" (1609). Weelkes wrote three books of madrigals prior to his appointment as organist at Chichester Cathedral, after which he concentrated on religious music. Gibbons' madrigals tend to have a contrapuntal texture like that of church music at the time. His works include "The Silver Swan" and "What Is Our Life?"