

Total performance time: approximately 85 minutes, including an interval of 20 minutes

The Gesualdo Six

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Guy James, Alasdair Austin countertenor
Joseph Wicks, Josh Cooter tenor

Michael Craddock baritone
Owain Park bass, director

Carlo Gesualdo (1566–1613)

In te Domine speravi (<i>Salmi delle complete</i> , 1594) 5' (‘In thee, O Lord, do I put my trust’)	<i>Early madrigals (1594–6):</i> 17'
	Felice primavera (‘Joyful spring’)
Peccantem me quotidie (<i>Sacrae Cantiones I</i> , 1603) 5' (‘I who sin every day’)	Sento che nel partire (‘I feel that in leaving ...’)
	Sospirava il mio core (‘My heart was sighing ...’)
Tenebrae Responsories (1611): 14'	Donna, se m’ancidete (‘Lady, if you kill me ...’)
<i>i. Tristis est anima mea</i> (‘My soul is sorrowful’)	
<i>ii. Tenebrae factae sunt</i> (‘Darkness fell’)	
<i>iii. O vos omnes</i> (‘All you, who pass by ...’)	<i>Later madrigals (1611):</i> 15'
Illumina faciem tuam (<i>Sacrae Cantiones I</i> , 1603) 4' (‘Show they servant the light of thy countenance’)	O tenebroso giorno (‘O, dark day ...’)
	Asciugate i begli occhi (‘Dry your beautiful eyes ...’)
Da pacem Domine (<i>Sacrae Cantiones II</i> , 1603) 4' (‘Give peace, Lord’) completed by Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)	Ancide sol la morte (‘Only death kills ...’)
	Moro, lasso, al mio duolo (‘I die, alas, in my suffering ...’)

INTERVAL

The view from the elevated courtyard of Castello di Gesualdo is breathtaking, with the sun setting between the rolling hills of Campania. It was from this vantage point that an aging Carlo Gesualdo would have gazed northward, toward Ferrara, from the grand doors of the castle that still bears his name. In this secluded, verdant setting, the sounds of the castle's chapel and choir would have echoed clearly through the air. Three hundred miles to the northwest, the fortress city of Ferrara was the cradle of Gesualdo's development as a composer, where he perfected the compositional language that would define his musical legacy.

The music of Carlo Gesualdo has always been a cornerstone of our repertoire — we performed his extraordinary *Tenebrae Responsories* for Maundy Thursday at our first concert. He is often portrayed as a radical in a conventional field, but it was composers such as Monteverdi who forged a new path and stitched the seams between the Renaissance and Baroque. The *Responsories* show Gesualdo's adherence to the old, 'Mannerist' style, full of profuse exaggeration and dramatic hyperbole, yet confined to a polyphonic framework. He had taken all the elements as far as they would go, and so it is even more remarkable that the resulting music is a canvas of vivid colours and textures in which the most simple and poignant moments shine through.

The radial preacher Girolamo Savonarola was born in Ferrara and remained a popular figure at the court there until long after his death in 1498, evidenced by the choice of texts by many Ferrara-linked composers, including Gesualdo. The text of *In te Domine speravi* (verses from Psalm 31) was the subject of Savonarola's incomplete second meditation from prison. Gesualdo's posthumously published setting is simple and psalm-like, and we intersperse the four-part choral texture with plainchant.

The opening subject in Gesualdo's *Peccantem me quotidie* spans the interval of a 7th, although he presents it with a twist: consisting of a falling 6th which only passes by that elusive seventh sin. The text is a *Respond* from the Office of the Dead, with the motet's dark and sombre tone capturing the essence of repentance and the struggle for redemption, perhaps reflecting Gesualdo's own fascination with themes of guilt and spiritual longing.

Towards the end of his life, and some 21 years after partial estrangement from society due to his crimes — murdering two people and using his title as Prince of Venosa to shield himself from retribution — Carlo Gesualdo published three sets of *Tenebrae Responsories* for Holy Week. The texts trace the events of the Passion, and were presumably performed in almost total darkness save for a handful of candles that were gradually extinguished. Gesualdo adheres to the rigidly austere formality of the *Nocturns*, sung liturgically in three groups of three *Responsories*, and he twists harmonies and melodic lines to create a profound musical expression of desolation.

The sacred motet *Illumina faciem tuam*, with its startling harmonic shifts and expressive word-painting, is typical of the composer: listen for the gradual build-up between 'salvum me' ('save me') and 'quoniam invocavi te' ('for I have called upon thee'), as the tension grows through ever more insistent repetitions.

Gesualdo's *Sacrae Cantiones II* for six voices is sadly incomplete, lacking two partbooks. It does however include three works featuring canons and the realisation of these canons results in works requiring only the editorial completion of the bass part, a job taken up by Igor Stravinsky in the 20th century, when Gesualdo's chromatic experimentation came back into vogue. His completion of *Da pacem Domine* elevates Gesualdo's work to a new level, with the bold bass part exploring far more territory than Gesualdo himself might have ventured, enhanced by Stravinsky's adventurous harmonic freedoms.

The **madrigal** settings composed by Gesualdo are well known today for their extreme style: his chromatic melodies create dissonant and disjointed harmonic progressions that explore the most melancholy aspects of the dark texts he set. Conversely, from his first book of madrigals, 'Felice primavera' is a simple setting of an uplifting text, which beautifully captures the lightness and joy of shepherds and nymphs dancing merrily in fields.

Found in his second book of madrigals, 'Sento che nel partire' opens with the higher four voices posing the opening argument, which is then answered in five parts. This dynamic interplay between different textures continues throughout, culminating in a lively, almost conversational passage, highlighting the protagonist's reluctance to depart quietly.

First published in Ferrara in 1595, Gesualdo's third book of madrigals marks a significant shift in the composer's style. 'Sospirava il mio core' explores themes of love and anguish, using bold harmonic shifts and dissonances to evoke the emotional turmoil of the text. Early in the work we hear a device known as 'figura suspirans', where the singer breathes or sighs on the beat, evoking a kind of sobbing expressiveness.

The closing work in Gesualdo's third book is 'Donna, se m'ancidete', is unusually scored for six voices. The opening line, 'Lady, if you kill me,' reflects the pain and despair of unrequited love, a common theme in Renaissance poetry and music. Gesualdo begins by using the voices as building blocks for harmonic progression, with several strong homophonic (chordal) moments punctuating the rhythmic flow. The piece is almost composed in a mirror image, with the opening section returning at the close, finally laid to rest in the home key.

We now move along almost 20 years, to Gesualdo's later books of madrigals, starting with 'O tenebroso giorno' from book five. The piece begins with ominous and forbidding tones sung in a deep register, before contrasting more uplifting harmonies that introduce a sense of flowing lightness. In 'Asciugate i begli occhi', Gesualdo's use of intricate harmonic progressions and bold chromaticism underscores the emotional depth of the text, which implores the addressee to dry their tears and embrace the fleeting beauty of love.

To conclude our programme, we turn to Gesualdo's sixth and final book of madrigals, published in 1611. In 'Ancide sol la morte', Gesualdo explores his full box of harmonic tricks to enhance the text's exploration of death as both a literal and metaphorical force. Finally, one of the most celebrated madrigals by Carlo Gesualdo: 'Moro, lasso', which conveys a powerful sense of anguish and despair, reflecting the text's theme of a love so intense it leads to a figurative death.