

O D'Amarti O Morire Program Notes

The opera was commissioned by and is dedicated to Brian Wismath. In the summer of 2006, Director Wismath asked me to compose a short opera for a concert of chamber operas he was planning. The opera *O D'Amarti O Morire* is the result—about a year later than we originally planned. After he approached me with the commission I was torn because I had wanted my first opera to be a tragic opera, and I wondered how I could do that within the time limitations we discussed. There is a need to develop some sort of plausibility to the impending tragedy with a story line.

I soon began thinking about the famous death scenario that all music majors learn about in history, especially when the universal text was the Donald Grout tome *A History of Western Music*. There is a very short summation of a late renaissance composer named Gesualdo who wrote chromatic madrigals and who had killed his wife and her lover after finding them in bed “*in flagrante delicto*,” which I have to say was never fully explained at the time (pre-internet) but we all knew it was something salacious. This became an ideal scenario—I could retell the final scenes of Gesualdo and the murders. The opera developed into three scenes and I tried to be somewhat accurate with historical accounts—I am indebted to the book on Gesualdo written by Glenn Watkins. The first scene presents the trap Gesualdo, and his servant have set to catch the lovers. He sings of his anguish over his music, love, and death, all with a dark foreboding. The second scene moves to Maria’s bedchambers where Fabrizio and Maria meet to renew their affair. They sing arias to each other and retire to make love. The third scene has Gesualdo breaking into the room and quickly slaying Fabrizio. Maria is wounded and then attacked again; Gesualdo leaves her for dead and flees to one of his other estates—Maria rises and sings a last aria to end the opera.

For the last fifteen years I composed in a harmonic style that was not tertian. I decided to re-explore a triadic-based harmonic language for this opera, loosely based on harmonic progression in the late chromatic madrigals of Gesualdo. I borrowed material from two of these madrigals (both written after the events of the opera, but indicative of his legacy and the historical significance of his music). First, I use *Morro lasso* and I chose a diatonic section with fast imitative passages right after the opening strings and piano. It has a very stylized renaissance feel although I have transposed it to an unusual mode. Gesualdo sings about the music not being right for his mood and I then excerpt the opening chromatic chords of *Morro lasso* and he actually sings an inner melody of this passage. I do not use much more borrowing until the opening of the final scene where I borrow a melodic line from the madrigal *Dolcissima mia vita*. It is near the end where the line is “*O d’amarti o morire*,” (to love thee or to die) which is the source for the title. I re-harmonize the line to fit the style I have been developing. I incorporate madrigalisms in the writing of the libretto, including poetic conceits (e.g., *the darker light*) common in the work of renaissance poets such as Petrarch.

The characters in the opera are all flawed. What I attempt to portray with the music is a pervading darkness, a certain sense of wrongness by all, but not the death sentence that is unilaterally handed down. I try to portray the lovers, in spite of the illicit nature of the affair, as beautiful and passionate, timeless, and in this case ultimately tragic.

The opera was premiered in the summer of 2008 in Toronto as part of *Three Operas in an Hour* under the direction of Mr. Wismath.

Peter Fischer