

About the Program

by Anne MacNeil

The Marchesa of Mantua, Isabella d'Este — known as “The First Lady of the Renaissance” — is often described as a female counterpart to the “Renaissance men” for whom Italy is celebrated. Among her interests, Isabella planned gardens and raised animals. She operated a perfume and cosmetic pharmacy that produced soaps and scents for herself and her friends. She excelled in fashion design, creating for herself a signature style that other women, like Lucretia Borgia, were eager to imitate. She was keenly interested in politics, government, and social life, and had evident gifts for all three, but it is chiefly for her activities as a patron and a collector that history remembers Isabella d'Este.

Her famous *studiolo* and *grotta*, the empty rooms of which may still be seen in the ducal palace in Mantua, once housed one of the most magnificent art collections of Europe. Isabella's paintings, sculpture, jewels, and other art objects demonstrate important themes of the Renaissance: possessing the ancient world through the collection of antiquities, demonstrating erudition and virtue through the acquisition of classical narratives, and fashioning an identity through portraiture and personal emblems. Her collecting increased her cultural capital among the aristocracy. It also reflected her humanist education as a child at the court of Ferrara, enhanced the prestige of the Gonzaga court in Mantua, and facilitated political and social opportunities for her children.

Isabella was a scholar of Greek, Latin, and Italian literatures, an avid musician, a patron of music and musicians, and a connoisseur of musical instruments. As a member of the nobility, she learned to sing, dance, and play music as a child — her tutor was the Netherlander Johannes Martini, *mæstro di cappella* of her father's ducal chapel. She learned to play musical instruments with Girolamo da Sextula and Giovanni Angelo Testagrossa, and Lorenzo Lavagnolo taught her to dance. As an adult, too, she continued her studies, both in music and in humanist literature. Her library, catalogued at her death, includes a substantial number of texts in ancient Latin and Greek, including works by Cicero, Aristotle, Ovid, and Virgil, and a host of compositions by more modern writers, including Francesco Petrarch, Dante Aligheri, and Jacopo Sannazaro. Also prominent in this collection are several books of psalms and the now-lost *Fior di musica* by the music theorist Franchino Gaffurio.

In his recollection of a utopian four days at the illustrious court of Urbino in 1507, the Mantuan author Baldassare Castiglione, in *The*

Book of the Courtier, relates to an assembly of dignitaries that,

If you pass into Lombardy, you will find Isabella, Marchioness of Mantua, of whose most admirable virtues it would be offensive to speak as restrainedly as anyone must do here who would speak of her at all. I regret, too, that all of you did not know her sister, the Duchess Beatrice of Milan, in order that you might never again have occasion to marvel at a woman's abilities. And Eleanora of Aragon, Duchess of Ferrara and mother of both of the ladies whom I have mentioned, was such that her most excellent virtues bore fair witness to the entire world that she was not only the worthy daughter of a king, but deserved to be queen of a much greater realm than all her ancestors had possessed.

Twenty-some years later, fellow Lombard writer Paolo Giovio, in his *Notable Men and Women of Our Time* (written in the wake of the Sack of Rome in 1527), offers us a more penetrating look into Isabella's character and the social concerns of the Italian nobility:

But in Isabella d'Este — Federico's mother and by far the most beautiful of Italian heroines, who was in the prime of youth a little while ago — there shine forth many virtues, and indeed the most splendid ones, which are hereditary and given as a dowry, as it were, from her royal origins. Of course, the Aragonese kings, to whom she is closely related on her mother's side, have given her splendor and regal dignity. But from her father, Ercole d'Este, she has derived prudence, moderation, and decorous, orderly conduct in the entire course of life, whether the winds of fortune are blowing adversely and intemperately, or favorably and gently. She has married these qualities, one by one, to the humanity, generosity, and graciousness of the House of Gonzaga, blending them in such a way that nothing appears to be either better or more distinguished than this difficult union of diverse elements.

Isabella's entire adult life from the age of 20, is set against the backdrop of the Italian Wars that stretched from 1494 to 1539, and her husband, the Marquis Francesco Gonzaga, was often at war. During her husband's absences, Isabella governed Mantua, supervising matters as diverse as criminal justice, diplomacy, land and agricultural management, public health, espionage, and domestic economy. She reported continuously to Francesco by letter, thus documenting in detail her activities as his proxy. When Francesco was in residence, Isabella often traveled as diplomatic envoy for their court, representing Mantuan interests at the courts of Rome, Milan, Venice, and Naples.

Our concert offers a prismatic soundscape of Isabella d'Este's life and the times in which she lived. From the opening fanfare and the concluding song "Alla guerra!" we hear echoes of the sounds of war that accompanied Isabella's life. "Forsi che si, forsi che no" and "Non è tempo d'aspettare" remind us of the vacillating winds of fortune that accompany war – changing tides that Paolo Giovio tells us Isabella navigated brilliantly. Many of the songs on our program,

including “J’ay pris amours,” written by Isabella’s childhood tutor, and the lusty “Poi che volse la mia stella,” recall the delights of love and the human desires that must be satisfied, even in times of political conflict, for Isabella’s primary responsibility in life was to produce male heirs to continue the Gonzaga hereditary line. Isabella’s and Francesco’s composers-in-residence, Bartolomeo Tromboncino and Marco Cara, together with their close friend and colleague Michele Pesenti, are well-represented here, as are two of the great poet-improvisers of the time, whose poetry and performances Isabella greatly admired: Benedetto Gareth (known as il Cariteo) and Serafino Aquilano. Nostalgic sounds of Isabella’s childhood at her father’s court in Ferrara resonate in the songs by Josquin. But war often inspires religious devotion and empathy for the anguish Christ suffered for humankind. Jacopo Sannazaro’s *Lamentation over the Body of the Redeemer of the World*, “Se mai per maraveglia,” Marco Cara’s recollection of Christ’s burden as he carried the cross in “Ave victorioso e sancto legno,” and even Serafino’s blending of a love story with John the Baptist’s annunciation of the coming of Christ in “Vox clamantis in deserto,” all speak to Isabella’s devotion in the midst of her worldly desires and responsibilities. The one song we know Isabella d’Este to have sung, “Cantai mentre nel cor lieto fioria,” offers us a moment when we might imagine the Marchesa is singing directly to us, in memory of the evening six hundred years ago in Naples when she sang it for her family and friends.

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