

## THE SAYLOR FOUNDATION'S THE RENAISSANCE MADRIGAL

### Thomas Weelkes's "As Vesta Was Descending"

**Introduction:** Throughout the sixteenth century, Italian composers became increasingly attracted to a secular genre called the madrigal. In this genre, an emotionally expressive poem, often dealing with love, was set to vocal music that attempted to musically illustrate the words or their emotional content through a technique known as word painting. Madrigals were the musical counterpart of the literature and visual arts of humanistic movement. Members of the Renaissance courts and other upper class citizens performed madrigals for each other as entertainment, sometimes without any audience other than the performers. The popularity of madrigals in Italy, and the resulting translation and publication of a number of them in England, resulted in the rise of a school of English madrigal composers. Among these composers was Thomas Weelkes (1576-1623, pronounced "Weeks"), who served as the organist at Chichester Cathedral until his dismissal from his post on grounds of habitual drunkenness and indulgence in obscene and blasphemous language.

"As Vesta Was Descending" comes from *The Triumphes of Oriana* (1601), an anthology of English madrigals written to honor Queen Elizabeth, referred to as Oriana in the poem. (Note the reference in Vesta to the "maiden queen;" Elizabeth never married and her romantic life was the subject of constant speculation by her contemporaries.) Although the Italian version of word painting often served the purpose of amplifying the emotional content of the text, English composers wrote music similar to that in "Vesta," in which the music attempts to illustrate individual words, especially those that indicated number or direction. The variety in a music setting, such as "Vesta," produced a musical composition that challenged the skilled amateurs who enjoyed performing madrigals.

"As Vesta Was Descending" offers up a hodgepodge of images from classical mythology, for example: the Roman goddess Vesta, on her way down Mount Latmos, sees Oriana/Elizabeth ascending the hill; the nymphs and shepherds attending the goddess Diana run away to sing Oriana's praises. The whole point of this rather lightweight verse is to provide opportunity for word painting. The word "descending" is sung to downward scales and "ascending," to upward ones. When Vesta's attendants run down the hill in twos, threes, and larger groups, the setting is for two voices, then three voices, then six voices. A solo voice laments that the goddess is left "all alone." In the extended concluding section, "Long live fair Oriana," a joyous phrase is imitated among the voices. In the bass this phrase is sung in long notes, with the longest note on the word "long." The length of time dedicated to this proclamation, about one third of the composition, is indicative of the ultimate purpose of the composition, to flatter the Queen.



## Listening Guide: “As Vesta Was Descending”

**Instructions:** All timings are approximations. You may want to follow along with the listening guide as you view the Voces 8 performance of Weelkes’s “As Vesta Was Descending” in the next section of this assignment.

00:00	As Vesta was from Latmos hill descending,	Descending scales on “descending”
00:15	she spied a maiden queen, the same ascending,	Ascending scales on “ascending”
00:38	attended on by all the shepherds swain,	Melody gently undulates, neither ascending nor descending.
00:58	to whom Diana's darlings came running down amain.	Rapid imitative descending figures on “running down”
01:25	First two by two, then three by three together,	Two voices, three voices, and then all voices
01:36	leaving their goddess all alone, hasted thither,	solo voice
01:51	and mingling with the shepherds of her train/with mirthful tunes her presence entertain.	All voices in delicate polyphony
02:15	Then sang the shepherds and nymphs of Diana,	All voices unite to introduce the final proclamation
02:29	Long live fair Oriana!	Brief, joyful phrase imitated among voices is repeated over and over
02:40		
End		



## **Performing Renaissance Madrigal**

**Instructions:** Listen to [Voces 8's performance of Thomas Weelkes' "As Vesta Was from Latmos Hill Descending"](#)\* on YouTube (2:40 minutes). Using the Listening Guide, make notes of instances when word painting is used in the composition. Then, listen once again, and take notes, evaluating how the singers' interpretations, individually and as a group, contribute to the interpretation of the music. Voces 8 clearly uses much more gesture, facial expression, and dynamic body movement than other choral groups who have sung this composition, and they do not use printed music in their performance. To compare Voces 8's performance to another group's rendition, please listen to the [Infinito Choir's performance](#)\* on YouTube (3:35 minutes).

Write down brief answers to the following questions. Do you find Voces 8's choices to be effective, or do they detract from the music in any way? Which performance (Voces 8's or Infinito Choir's) might have been more appreciated by a Renaissance audience?

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