Paul Schleuse (Binghamton University)

“Singing Madrigals about Singing Madrigals, or, Adriano Banchieri on the Delights of Modern Music”

The Bolognese monk and composer Adriano Banchieri’s three books of unaccompanied five-voice madrigals, published between 1603 and 1608, represent a departure from his previous series of commedia-dell’arte-based three-voice canzonetta books (four books published 1597-1601, with a fifth in 1607). Historians have traditionally grouped all eight of these books together under the specious label “madrigal comedy,” although the books Banchieri designated as containing madrigals do not refer to theatrical traditions. Instead, they depict recreational music-making in social settings: that is, they imitate situations similar (though not identical) to the ones in which book buyers would be likely to sing the songs they contain. Rejecting the tendency to insist on a quasi-dramatic function for these books enables us to read them in the context of early-modern sociability, and in this light they take on a distinctly didactic function. Whether the singers imagine themselves as idealized pastoral shepherds (Il zabatone musicale, 1603), an assortment of lower-class characters thrown together on a boat (La barca di Venezia per Padova, 1605), or guests at an urban dinner party (Il festino nella sera del giovedì grasso avanti cena, 1608), they engage models of approved (courtly) and proscribed (rustic) behavior by imaginatively envoicing both. Moreover, in his sung texts and printed paratexts Banchieri engages contemporary debates over musica moderna in his own idiosyncratic way.