

AN EVENING OF SONGS BY THOMAS CAMPION

performed by Stephen Ratcliffe and Larry Polansky

Since being rediscovered on the dusty shelves of the British Museum nearly a hundred years ago, Thomas Campion has been praised by poets, critics, and scholars as one of the finest of the Elizabethan poets, "the one poet whose loss would leave a chasm in our literature" (C.S. Lewis). His poems have been valued for their technical mastery of sound, syntax, and rhythmic structure, their smoothly polished precision and gracefully delicate charm making of them what W.H. Auden called "a succession of verbal paradises in which the only element taken from the world of everyday reality is the English language." Campion's poems were in fact the word half of songs--words plus the music, which Campion himself also wrote. (As a poet/composer Campion was unique in the great age of Elizabethan song, the standard practice being that a composer would set someone else's words to music.) Campion wrote some 116 songs, published in five separate books between 1603 and 1617, as well as masques (performed in the court of King James), theoretical treatises on poetics and music, and two books of Latin poetry; he was also a practicing physician, law student at the Inns of Court, a sometime 'Gentleman Soldier,' and quite possibly a conspirator in a scandalous political assassination--in short, your Renaissance man par excellence.

Ratcliffe and Polansky will perform a selection of songs from A Booke of Ayres (1603), all but unknown to most listeners (the only substantial recording, one side of a Deutsche Gramophone release, is long out of print), including "My Sweatest Lesbia," "Though You Are Young," "I Care Not For These Ladies." The songs are fun, overtly erotic, bitter, poignant, remarkably feminist in their outlook, indeed remarkably contemporary. Ratcliffe will talk about the songs, as much as people would like, and both Ratcliffe and Polansky would be pleased also, if there were interest, to read/perform some of their own original works.

Stephen Ratcliffe is a poet and writer, currently Assistant Professor at Mills College, where he teaches courses in creative writing, Shakespeare and poetry. He is the author of Campion: On Song (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981)--an exhaustive account of one song by Thomas Campion which attempts to explain the remarkable aesthetic appeal of Campion's songs and to investigate the aesthetics of songs generally--and New York Notes (Tombouctou, 1983). He has two books of poetry forthcoming this year, Before Photography (Tombouctou) and Rustic Diversions (Les Ferriss), and is currently at work on a new book of experimental prose/poems and a series of essays on the reader as writer in post-modernist poetics. Together with Larry Polansky, he has performed the songs of Campion at the San Jose State Poetry Center and at Mills College.

Larry Polansky is a composer, theorist, performer, writer, systems designer and teacher currently Assistant Professor of Music at Mills College, where he teaches electronic and computer music, orchestration, American music, and co-directs (with William Winant) the Contemporary Music Ensemble. He is also on the staff of the Center for Contemporary Music at Mills, where he is involved in the design and implementation of microcomputer based composition and performance systems, as well as in teaching and administrative activities, and directing the Seminar in Formal Methods Series. Polansky has written extensively on music theory and on American music, including a book on the works of composer James Tenney. His works have been performed internationally, and he is currently working on pieces for virtuoso performers and interactive intelligent computer systems.