

02. Lullaby / Upon my lap my Sovereigne sits (Private Musicke; 1620)

Martin Peerson
(c. 1572-1650)
arr. William Melton

Peerson, Martin

(born between 1571-73, probably in March, Cambridgeshire; buried January 15, 1651 in London)

“Probably” is the operative word for Peerson’s youth: descended from generations of yeoman farmers, his parents were probably Thomas and Margaret Peerson (or Pearson, Pierson, or Peersonn). The poet Sir Fulke Greville, 1st Baron Brooke, probably acted as his patron, introducing him to the likes of Sir Philip Sidney and Sir Francis Bacon. Peerson, who married twice but fathered no offspring, is first documented as a vocal composer in 1604, soon afterwards wrote for the virginal, and took a degree at Oxford in 1613 (probably exchanging his Catholicism for the prevailing Protestantism in the process). He then held posts in London at Westminster Abbey (probably) and, after 1625, was almoner and master of choristers at St. Paul’s Cathedral. This last is certain, as was Peerson’s burial in St. Faith’s Chapel under St. Paul’s.

Martin Peerson left about a hundred compositions, including anthems and motets (*Mottects or Grave Chamber Musiqve*, London, 1630), keyboard and consort music, and secular vocal music like the collection *Private Musick or the First Booke of Ayres and Dialogues* (London, 1620). “Although his art is rooted in the Elizabethan epoch,” observed Marilyn Wales, “he was greatly influenced by Italian composers like Marenzio.” “Upon my lap my Sovereigne sits” is a lullaby from *Private Musicke* with a text by Richard Verstegan (who also went under the name Richard Rowlands, an Anglo-Dutch writer and printer who left England for Antwerp about 1585). In this poem a mother reflects upon the joys and responsibilities of motherhood, all the while singing a lullaby to her offspring. Of course Mary, the mother of Jesus, was the archetypal mother of the age, and so the “Sovereigne” on her lap takes on a double meaning. “An impressive feature is the intense, introspective gloom of a good deal of this music,” wrote Audrey Jones, “created by minor keys, low-lying parts, chromaticism and especially by the frequent use of augmented chords.”

Upon my lap my Sovereigne sits,
And leans upon my brest,
Meane time His love maynetaines my life,
And gives my sense her rest.

Sing lullaby, my little Boye,
Sing lullaby, mine onely joy.

When thou by sleep art overcome,
Repose, my Babe, on me,
So may thy mother and thy nurse,
Thy cradle also be.

Sing lullaby, my little Boye,
Sing lullaby, mine onely joy.

Text by William Melton