

## **Gesualdo da Venosa on the IV<sup>th</sup> Centenary of his Birth**

**Nino Pirrotta**

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§ Il contributo presenta la traduzione di uno dei più importanti articoli di Nino Pirrotta, *Gesualdo da Venosa nel quarto centenario della sua nascita*, la cui circolazione è stata fortemente limitata dal difficile reperimento del testo originale e dalla mancanza di una versione inglese. L'articolo fu scritto come commento all'esecuzione di alcuni brani di Gesualdo e di altri compositori coevi, trasmessi alla radio italiana nel 1961. Oltre a ripercorrere i fatti salienti della vita di Gesualdo, l'articolo di Pirrotta propone un'acuta disamina delle priorità compositive del Principe, delle sue scelte in materia di testi poetici e dei suoi risultati artistici.

§ Translation of one of Nino Pirrotta's most important articles, *Gesualdo da Venosa on the IV<sup>th</sup> Centenary of his Birth*, which appeared in a relatively inaccessible publication and never in English translation, thus undeservedly limiting its circulation. The article was written to accompany the performance of compositions by Gesualdo and his contemporaries, broadcast over Italian radio in 1961, and is a recapitulation of Gesualdo's life and a sensitive evaluation of his compositional priorities, poetic choices, and artistic achievements.

TRANSLATORS' NOTE

*Nino Pirrotta's Gesualdo da Venosa nel IV centenario della nascita. 1. Le tentazioni della monodia 2. Gli anni di Ferrara 3. La pastorale dell'io was first published in Terzo programma. Quaderni trimestrali II (ERI. Edizioni della Radiotelevisione italiana [RAI], Roma e Torino 1961), pp. 199-216, where it was accompanied by the note: «Tutti i testi pubblicati nel presente Quaderno sono stati trasmessi dal Terzo Programma nel primo trimestre del 1961». Anthony Newcomb (NEWCOMB 1968) has rightly described it as «richly informative but difficult to find». It is also written in an elegant and complex Italian. For these two reasons, we have sought to increase its accessibility by means of this translation. Pirrotta noted that the text was «written and read as a comment to the casting of about 30 pieces, mainly by Gesualdo» (for this information, we are grateful to Professor Newcomb). As the published, tripartite version of the paper suggests, the broadcast was in three installments: on 2 January, 8 January, and 22 January 1961. Pirrotta's commentary ran to some 60 minutes, the musical performances to almost 80 (on the broadcast, see GIULIANI 2003). Pirrotta's text had no footnotes, and the few we added were to refer to newly-discovered documents about Gesualdo's date and place of birth, to correct a minor error, to comment on the variant spelling of two names, and to provide up-to-date, supplementary bibliographic information where appropriate. Otherwise we have allowed Pirrotta's text to stand as it was when first published, especially because the importance of the article depends less upon the discovery of new data than upon Pirrotta's subtle analysis and interpretation of Gesualdo's madrigals, destined to be of continuing interest even in the face of more recent findings concerning the composer's biography and his music-historical era. We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Professor Newcomb, who carefully reviewed our translation and suggested many improvements, virtually all of which suggestions we happily accepted. He is not to be held responsible for any erroneous formulations or infelicities of expression that remain; such responsibility is ours alone.*

## 1. The temptations of monody

**D**ON Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa, Count of Cossa, Marquis of Laino, Duke of Caggiano and lord of many other places, is being celebrated this year with a centenary – a putative centenary, that is. During his lifetime, the Prince of Venosa was a famous figure, nephew of Saint Carlo Borromeo on his mother's side and head of one of the most noble families in the kingdom of Naples, which boasted descent from the Norman kings.

Nonetheless, to the profound disappointment of his biographers, no document is known attesting the place and date of his birth.<sup>1</sup> He was born, they tell us, *perhaps* in Naples *around* 1560. But even an approximate date is an auspicious occasion when it concerns as great an artist as Gesualdo undoubtedly was. In any case, the date is just the first of a series of uncertainties running all the way through his biography, right up to his death, which occurred, *it seems*, the evening of 8 September 1613.

In all this hazy elusiveness, two events from Gesualdo's life stand out, owing to the abundant, precise and – sometimes – crude details. The first incident – the murder of his first wife, Maria d'Avalos, and Fabrizio Carafa, Duke of Andria, surprised in a secret *tête-à-tête* the night of 16 October 1590 – has been discussed over and over again by his biographers. It stirred up a great deal of interest, especially in French literature from Brantôme to Anatole France, not to mention a more recent English book entitled *Carlo Gesualdo, Musician and Murderer*.<sup>2</sup> But perhaps the only thing revealed about the murderer's character by the authentic documents – the squalid records of the inquest – is that he may have been motivated more by the offense to his name than by personal resentment. A better source for direct access to our subject is a series of letters dating from the time of Gesualdo's second marriage to Eleonora d'Este, cousin<sup>3</sup> of the last Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso II. They were written for the benefit of Duke Alfonso, who was as anxious as we are, albeit for different reasons, to understand the personality of the man who was about to become a part of his family.

The author of this exceptional reportage is Count Alfonso Fontanella,<sup>4</sup> who was appointed by the Duke of Ferrara to go to meet the Prince of Venosa, and who later accompanied the newlyweds on their journey to the kingdom of Naples and the castello of Gesualdo. After some uncertainty about the route followed by the bridegroom – it was said that he had wanted to visit the Bishop of Modena, a mediator in the marriage negotiations – Fontanella met Gesualdo on 18 February 1594. Having come with his large retinue up the

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<sup>1</sup> The date and probable place of Gesualdo's birth are now known – 8 March 1566, probably at Venosa – thanks to two letters in the Archivio Borromeo of the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan. See BRANCATI 2012 and BRANCATI 1997.

<sup>2</sup> GRAY 1926.

<sup>3</sup> Pirrotta writes *nipote*, but Eleonora's father (another Alfonso) and Alfonso II's father (Ercole II) were half-brothers, Eleonora's father being an illegitimate son of Alfonso I.

<sup>4</sup> Sometimes spelled Fontanelli.

Adriatic coast, the Prince was pleased to accept the invitation to leave his carriage and continue in greater comfort by boat along the Po di Primaro. Fontanella wrote a long letter about the meeting that same evening from Argenta, the last stop before their arrival at Ferrara. He provides a portrait in which reserve barely cloaks his sarcasm toward the guest – illustrious for sure, but a southerner. The Prince, he writes, «intends to ride in his carriage once he is off the boat so as to avoid the mud and not have to change his dress»; the Prince «is of a mind to arrive at 23 o'clock, but I don't count on it because he is a very late riser»; the Prince is impatient to get to know his bride, «thereby revealing» – Fontanella comments – «a very Neapolitan disposition»; and further: «this gentleman gets served in a *very* grand manner with a touch of Spanish ceremonial, as for instance carrying the lit torch before the cup, covering the plate while he drinks, and so on». Fontanella also has reservations about his physical appearance: «Although at first he doesn't seem to possess the presence of a prince, he is slowly becoming more revered... I haven't seen his figure because he wears a robe as long as a nightgown; but tomorrow I believe he will be festively dressed... He talks a lot and gives no indication of melancholy, except perhaps in his face».

While Fontanella's letters undoubtedly help bring to life the faded image of the Prince of Venosa painted in an altarpiece still to be seen in the church at Gesualdo, they are even more important for understanding the musician's activity, as it was then perceived.

The court of Ferrara, extremely proud of its highly refined musical life, could not have been indifferent to the bridegroom's reputation as fanatical music-lover, which had travelled before him. This is indicated by the very choice of envoy, Fontanella, who was a lover of music and composer of madrigals. Already when reporting from Argenta, he sends mostly information dealing with music. The Prince, writes Fontanella, «talks about hunting and music and claims that he is skilled in both. I couldn't vouch for what he said about hunting; but when he spoke about music he told me more than I have heard in an entire year. He speaks very openly about music and shows his works in score to everyone to get them to marvel at his art. This evening after supper he asked that a harpsichord be found so that I could hear Scipione Stella while he played the guitar, an instrument he holds in the highest regard; but there was none to be found in all of Argenta. Therefore, so as not to spend the evening without any music, he did me the favor of playing the lute for an hour and a half. It would probably not displease Your Highness that I give my opinion here; but it pleases me, with your leave, not to say anything until purer ears pronounce judgment. *It is clear that his art is infinite. However, he strikes poses and makes extraordinary movements*».

The compositions that the Prince showed Fontanella while they were stopping at Argenta – «two sets of books for five voices, all by him», it says in another part of the letter – are none other than the two books of madrigals that were shortly to be published (in May and June 1594) by the ducal printer

Vittorio Baldini in Ferrara. According to the custom of that period, a nobleman of his status must not be seen to desire publicity for his works; in fact, it fell to Scipione Stella, the only one of the four musicians accompanying the Prince to be named in Fontanella's letter, to take the initiative to get them published and to dedicate them to the most noble author, adding – in keeping with the pretense – the most humble excuses for boldness caused by an excess of admiration. The two books were not numbered progressively as the later ones would be. The first to be published, which contained the Prince's most recent compositions, opens with the madrigal *Caro amoroso neo*, probably a compliment to Eleonora d'Este, on a text by Torquato Tasso. The poet, by then far away from the court of Ferrara, had often been a guest of the Prince of Venosa's family during his Neapolitan sojourns of 1588 and 1592, and his letters to Don Carlo attest that he had sent him at least forty or so madrigalian texts. But Gesualdo did not include more than about ten of his texts in his published compositions. Already at that time, Gesualdo's poetic choices were guided by a preference for the greatest epigrammatic conciseness, a predilection that would only intensify over time.

The madrigal *Baci soavi e cari* opens the collection published in the second book, which we know to be slightly older than the first, though not by much. These are not the early attempts of a novice composer. The contents of this older collection, too, can hardly be dated before 1590, when Gesualdo was already around thirty.<sup>5</sup> It reveals an assurance and sincerity of purpose that fully justifies the complacent boasting of the Prince to which Fontanella refers. The initial phrases of the two parts constituting the madrigal, *Baci soavi e cari* and *Quanto ha di dolce amore*, suffice to indicate the dominant tone of the composition and, up to a certain point, of the entire collection to which it forms a prelude. It is not difficult to recognize ideas that abound in the kind of pastoral poetry written by Guarini. And as often happens in the last two decades of the century, the musician's response to the delicately feigned elegance, to the softness and veiled sensuality of the text, is a tendency to renounce, at least in part, the contrapuntal artifices in order to be able to abandon himself to a more continuous and arioso melody, concentrated above all, but not exclusively, in the uppermost voice.

When searching for a more fully developed melody or an anti-contrapuntal approach, we would do well to remember that the Neapolitan milieu offered a prototype, local in origin but already European in its fame and diffusion, namely the *villanella alla napolitana*, which adds flavor to the melody with a light touch of harmonic folklorism – the astringency of the famous parallel fifths, for those who love technical precision. It is not improbable, even in the absence of direct evidence, that the Prince of Venosa composed *villanelle alla napolitana* in his youth; however, there is no doubt that he scorned the idea of having them published, just as he did not see to the

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<sup>5</sup> According to the newly-found documents establishing the date of his birth, Gesualdo would have been 24 in 1590.

publication of some of his *canzonette* for five voices, which appeared posthumously in 1618, with Pomponio Nenna's *Eighth Book* of madrigals. It is thus to Pomponio Nenna and Orazio Vecchi that we turn for examples of the auditory pleasure born of the free unravelling of melody in the *villanella alla napoletana* and in its sister, the *canzonetta*, which differs only in being purged of the hint of local color. Nenna, born in Bari, was active in the Neapolitan milieu and was one of the musicians closest to the Prince; Orazio Vecchi, from Modena, probably made the Prince's acquaintance during one of his sojourns in Ferrara. The *villanella* for three voices *A chi vo' chieder del mio mal conforto* is by Nenna. The text of Vecchi's *canzonetta* summarizes – albeit with mild mockery of the effect of sweetness – the aesthetic of refined simplicity with a new precept for each strophe: of rhythm, «Make a song without black notes»; of harmony, «Don't sprinkle harshness within»; of counterpoint, «Don't make ciphers, or note against note». Also the close gently mocks a theory of musical catharsis:

<i>Con questo stile il fortunato Orfeo</i>	[With this style, fortunate Orpheus
<i>Prosperina la giù placar poteo;</i>	was able to placate Prosperina down below;
<i>questo è lo stile che quetar già feo,</i>	this is the style that once calmed,
<i>con dolcezza a Saul lo spirto reo!</i>	with sweetness, the guilty spirit of Saul!]

The possibility of a comparison in Gesualdo's own milieu is offered by Pomponio Nenna's madrigal *Dolce mio foco ardente*, perhaps a bit earlier than the Prince of Venosa's *Baci soavi e cari* and not dissimilar in text – if anything, it is more courtly. Nenna, too, tends toward an arioso melody, but he does so as a professional musician. Moreover, in his first book of madrigals for five voices he cannot forego demonstrating all his technical artifices. The top voice predominates melodically, but its entrance is preceded in canon by two other voices, and its second phrase emerges fully only after having served as countersubject to the first. The extreme naturalness and smoothness with which all this is carried out is to the credit of a highly gifted musician, but its value is more decorative than expressive.

Gesualdo, too, frequently has recourse to contrapuntal imitation in his madrigals, though with Gesualdo it happens when the stimulus offered by the text is more conceptual than emotive. An example of this is the very brief *Amor, pace non chero*, which after a recitative-like and chromatic beginning, unfolds with the double image – a subtle witticism, they would have called it in the sixteenth century – *s'ella medica sia, sii tu guerriero* [if she is physician, you are warrior].

An intriguing novelty in Fontanella's letters is the abovementioned description of Gesualdo as performer on the lute *with infinite art*. But even more surprising are the indications – less explicit, but certain – of his interest as polyphonist in a certain type of musical practice that shortly afterwards developed into a new trend of musical composition, classified by the history of

music as accompanied monody. The Prince of Venosa's request for a harpsichord (which could not be found in Argenta) probably alludes to such a practice. The custom of singing while playing the harpsichord is in fact cited by another noble dilettante of music, the Roman Vincenzo Giustiniani, as an elegant development of the vogue for the *villanella alla napoletana*. In his *Discorso sopra la musica*, Giustiniani refers to three people who he believed deserved the most credit for spreading this new type of song. One of these is Gian Leonardo Primavera, who figured among the Neapolitan musicians mentioned as having often participated at musical gatherings in the house of Don Fabrizio Gesualdo, father of Don Carlo, and who dedicated a book of his madrigals to Don Carlo in 1585; another is Don Cesare Brancacci, an adventurous gentleman, likewise Neapolitan, who was highly regarded in Ferrara by Duke Alfonso II and who appears in one of the most famous accounts of the pastimes at the Estense court, the *Discorsi* of Annibale Romei.

Singing to the harpsichord represented the refined equivalent of singing authentic or presumed popular tunes to the accompaniment of the *colascione* or *cètola*. It would have allowed the performer a spontaneity, immediacy and elasticity of enunciation difficult to achieve when singing in an ensemble. Another *villanella alla napoletana*, Colanardo di Monte's *So 'nnamorato*, demonstrates the advantages of this type of execution, which anticipates one of the most famous concepts of the monodic reform, the *sprezzatura* of Caccini and Peri.

Fontanella's subsequent letters to the Duke of Ferrara reveal an even closer tie between the Prince of Venosa and the monodist innovators. There is repeated mention of a «Florentine who sings to the *chitarrone*», stipendiary of the Prince, who aroused great curiosity and admiration among the Neapolitan ladies and gentlemen. His name is not mentioned in any of the letters, and his identification as Scipione Palla, Caccini's teacher, can be rejected because based on an erroneous reading of Fontanella's very agitated handwriting. However, it is evident that at the time of these letters, the summer of 1594, Gesualdo was composing an *aria*, a term that would shortly become the most common one for compositions in the new monodic style. The extent to which the Prince of Venosa's musical nature appreciated the rhythmic liberty of the performance, in which precise rhythmic mensuration was superseded by a different expressive precision – *sprezzatura*, in short – is revealed to us by how he *poses and moves* in playing the lute, caught by the shrewd and censorious eye of Fontanella. The severe criticism with which Gesualdo selected the music that he consented to be published did not allow a single one of his intentionally monodic compositions to filter through. However, the arioso nature and the expressive prevalence of the upper voice in the composition *Sì gioioso mi fanno* tells us that the monodic mode of execution was often applied also to madrigalesque compositions published in polyphonic form.

Gesualdo – at least, the Gesualdo, in his late twenties, of the period to which this composition belongs – appears very different from the usual

picture given of him. He is irrepressible, aggressive, almost explosive, not with dark despair, but rather with frank joy, triumphant. Yet at the same time it becomes clear why he failed to find satisfaction in both the elegant simplicity of the *villanella* and the vocalistic beauty of Caccinian melody. An intensity of accent equal to that of Gesualdo is in fact rarely encountered in the madrigalian literature.

Among the few examples that we can cite is one by Jacques Wert, a master whom Gesualdo certainly esteemed. Before transferring to the court of Mantua, Wert had worked for the counts of Novellara, which often brought him to Ferrara, where he became romantically involved with Tarquinia Molza, one of the singing ladies of the Estense court. The example in question is a stanza by Ariosto (the one expressing the fury of Bradamante's homicidal jealousy) set to music by Wert,<sup>6</sup> and while it is much earlier than the music of the Prince of Venosa, it, too, is suitable for – in fact, it demands – execution in the form of a monody accompanied instrumentally.

Although the Prince of Venosa was undoubtedly disposed to allow the performance of some of his madrigals as monodies, as *arie*, there are two reasons why he would not have been able to follow the direction indicated by Wert's example. One is because of the reference to another folkloristic feature from which he certainly would have shrunk – the recitative-like, formulaic arias to which common singers performed the octaves of epic poems. Furthermore, because of the schematic simplicity of the music, the dramatic effect of Wert's octave depended entirely on an emphasis provided by the performer's enunciation, and this was even less acceptable to Gesualdo. The Prince of Venosa aspired to more artistic solutions to the problem of expressive intensity, solutions that derived from the composer rather than from the performer. In some cases he came close to what monodists like Peri or Monteverdi (but not Caccini) would produce a few years after 1594; that is, he turned to the resources of vivid and unexpected harmony to underline and intensify the expressivity of a melodic line. A nucleus of dramatic monodic inspiration is recognizable, for instance, in the madrigal *Com'esser può ch'io viva se m'uccidi*. But the fundamental melodic line, far from being exposed and isolated, first meanders in the tenor, winding itself around the homophony of the others, rises into the second soprano, emerges briefly in the uppermost voice, and then takes off again, disintegrating, dissociating and reassociating itself in the varied order of the five voices.

It is clear that the Prince of Venosa did not side with the most radical of his contemporaries in their loss of faith in polyphonic language. Already in the years before the publication of his first two books of madrigals he had become

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<sup>6</sup> Pirrotta's reference is almost certainly to Wert's *Dunque basciar* (ARIOSTO, *Orlando furioso*, XXXVI/32-33), in IL PRIMO LIBRO DE' MADRIGALI | A QVATTRO VOCI | DI GIACHES DE VVERT NOVAMENTE POSTI IN LVCE | Et da lui proprio coretti. | [mark] | *In Venegia Appresso Girolamo Scotto*. 1561, p. 10. For this suggestion, we are grateful to Anthony Newcomb. Also, see EINSTEIN 1951.



aware of the new directions in which other musicians of his time were heading. He had neither rejected nor ignored them. Instead, he tended to let himself be stimulated by the new practices without renouncing the rich palette of those already in use. The madrigal *O come è gran martire* demonstrates that he already knew how to combine and alternate – succinctly – the gentleness of harmonic dissonance with the sweetness of the *canzonetta* type of melody, the rhythmic incisiveness of the choral recitative with the suddenness of the distinctive melodic gesture of the single voices.

## 2. The years at Ferrara

It is generally held that Gesualdo's second marriage was prompted by the need for social rehabilitation. And yet, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the more anxious of the two parties to conclude the marriage was the family of the bride, the house of Este. The Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso II, though not old, was declining physically. He had no direct heirs and had lost hope of having any. Ferrara was a papal vicariate, and more than one pope had expressed determination that upon the Duke's death the duchy be reannexed by the Church, a possibility against which Alfonso fought with all possible means. The Prince of Venosa was a nephew not only of a luminary of the Counter-Reformation, Saint Carlo Borromeo, who had died over a decade before, but also of a living and active member of the College of Cardinals, the Archbishop of Naples, Alfonso Gesualdo, considered by many a possible candidate for the papacy. The nuptial agreements hatched between Cardinal Gesualdo and the Bishop of Modena barely disguise Ferrara's desperate attempt to gain an intercessor in the cause of the designated successor, Don Cesare d'Este, brother of the future bride.

The matrimonial motives of the Prince of Venosa were just as obvious. While difficult relations with Neapolitan society may have played a role in his decision, Fontanella's letters leave no doubt about his desire to be introduced and enjoy artistic success at the court long recognized as the most aristocratic and exclusive center of refined musical practices. «Professor of music» he declared himself to Fontanella – not dilettante and occasional musician, rather an expert and profoundly dedicated artist – but his social status placed him in a singular condition for a musician. Every possibility of professional competition, every success as a practicing musician, was out of the question for him. His ambition could find only the most meager compensation in the tributes paid him by Neapolitan musicians who had worked for his father, or were his own dependents, or who aspired to enter his service. His situation can be compared to the (superficially comic) plight of an extremely rich heiress yearning for an impartial lover. Even the widespread dissemination of his works can hardly have interested him. The fact that four of his books of madrigals were printed at Ferrara in rapid succession between 1594 and 1596 prove that for the Prince of Venosa it mattered more that they be brought out

by the privileged presses of the ducal printer than that they receive the anonymous praise of the public.

We do not know if the Prince's aspirations were satisfied by the only artistic circle to which he desired admission. Hypercritical as he was, and careless about hiding it, one suspects that he attracted harsh judgments.

Our source once again is Fontanella's ironical correspondence, which had been interrupted during the sojourn at Ferrara but was resumed a few months later on the occasion of Gesualdo's visit to Venice. Although travelling incognito, the Prince was received by the elderly Doge Cicogna, who uttered exaggerated expressions of admiration, which had been arranged on the sly by Fontanella to flatter him. If any senator were to complain, the effusions could always be attributed to the Doge's senility and vacillating judgment. The Patriarch of Aquileia, too, organized a reception with music for the nephew of Cardinal Gesualdo. «But» – Fontanella wrote to Duke Alfonso – «they sing badly in Venice, and Your Highness knows what fastidious taste his Excellency has. Therefore he could not restrain himself from calling the musician in charge and a harpsichordist and arguing with them, treating them in such a way that I felt compassion. He hasn't yet been able to see Giovanni Gabrieli, organist of San Marco, but he sets so many traps for him that he, too, will end up in the net, and I judge he will not leave without displeasure».

Fontanella's letters do not tell us if Gesualdo managed to meet the main representative of the Venetian school of music, but they do tell us about the admiration that the Prince often emphatically expressed about the organist at the court of Ferrara, Luzzasco Luzzaschi. Gesualdo's declaration of «having undertaken to imitate Luzzasco, whom he greatly loves and celebrates», might make us feel hopeful momentarily of tracking down the sources of his style. But the illusion is fleeting. Luzzaschi, pupil of Cipriano de Rore and teacher of Frescobaldi, is himself a critical, unresolved problem in the music history of late sixteenth-century Italy. There are no modern editions of his,<sup>7</sup> which is also the case with many other Italian musicians. Moreover, his association with the Ferrarese court, which was continuous from 1576<sup>8</sup> until after Alfonso II's death in 1597, makes it legitimate to suspect that an important part of his production – the repertory reserved for the musical pleasures of the Estense – was then still unpublished. The fourth book of Luzzasco's madrigals appeared in Ferrara in 1594, shortly after the arrival of Gesualdo, to whom it is dedicated. Two further books came out in the following two years, but in neither of them did Einstein, the principal interpreter of the Italian madrigal, manage to detect Gesualdo's models, except perhaps in minor details. One has the impression that the Prince either referred to earlier compositions by Luzzaschi

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, the situation has changed considerably since Pirrotta first drafted his text. There are now excellent modern editions of Luzzaschi's madrigals, both his madrigals for one, two, and three sopranos and harpsichord (LUZZASCHI 1965) and also his polyphonic madrigals (LUZZASCHI (2003-2010).

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Newcomb suggests that the date is more likely to be 1561.

or created a subjective ideal for himself, based on his own image and semblance. Undoubtedly Luzzaschi's music reflected the aesthetic then current at the Ferrarese court, tending more toward the artful hedonism of Guarini than the pathos of Tasso, which attracted the Prince. Guarini's *Pastor fido* provided the text of *O primavera, gioventù dell'anno*, in a famous collection of madrigals for one, two and three voices published by Luzzaschi in 1601, after Duke Alfonso's death and the dissolution of the Ferrarese circle. It may have been in response to Caccini's *Nuove Musiche*, in order to demonstrate how far also the court of the dead Duke had progressed along the road to the new monodic style. The composition is for one solo female voice, but the number of voices employed in the greater part of the collection – three sopranos – is a clear reference to the Ferrarese court's singing trio, which engaged the most famous female singers of the time, loved and eulogized by poets and celebrated not only for their musical gifts but also for their beauty, elegance, culture and spirit.

In the grace of the melodic lines, in the vocal *coloratura*, not so rich as to become decoration but sufficiently rich to hold the attention of the listener, the dominant note in Luzzaschi's music is one of late classicism, of languid passions, of beauty mourned. An example from Book III of Gesualdo's madrigals immediately establishes the contrasting attitudes. The following quotation from the text shows the Prince of Venosa intent on trying the most diverse possibilities of choral recitative:

«Non t'amo» – o voce ingrata! – la mia donna mi disse e con pungente strale di duol e di martir l'alma trafisse.	[«I do not love you» – oh, ungrateful voice! – my lady said to me and with a sharp arrow of sorrow and torment she pierced the soul.]
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Here Gesualdo joins violent repulsion and sorrowful comment – the vivacious and the languid exclamation, in terms of Caccinian rhetoric – the narration, the Baroque image of violent movement and that of inner desolation. In the music, the succession is equally rapid. Gesualdo does not linger over any of his usual exaggerated repetitions, and when at last he resorts to counterpoint – at the words *Pur vissi e vivo* – he does so with a quick sequence of entries of a theme, whose brief exclamatory contour might be called expressionistic.

Still, the singing ladies of the Estense court were part of the fascination that drew Gesualdo to Ferrara, though if his vanity prompted any gallant or sentimental ambitions, he would have been disappointed. By 1594, even Laura Peperata,<sup>9</sup> the youngest of the stars in the Estense firmament, was no longer the 'rare damsel' who had been Tasso's inspiration for a few elegant octaves before she arrived at Ferrara. But artistically the influence of the famous trio

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<sup>9</sup> Sometimes spelled Peverara or Peperara.

can be heard in several madrigals of Book IV. Gesualdo's intention is clear, for instance, in isolating the three female voices in the long soloistic beginning of the madrigal *Arde il mio cuore*. However, the analogy stops with the technical formula. Regarding expression, the three voices with lean and nervous lines are distinguished from those of Luzzaschi right from the start. In place of an extended *coloratura*, the burst of the initial melodic passage expands into thematic elaboration. At the same time the relationship between sound and word is so terse that, even though the entire text is repeated twice, the resulting structure does not weigh down either the metaphoric blaze of the beginning or the final broad exclamation.

Gesualdo's *Ecco morirò dunque* of Book IV is another madrigal whose source of inspiration evidently stems from the three ladies of the celebrated trio. Right from the beginning Gesualdo forsakes not only the merest suggestion of *coloratura*, but also the independence of the three voices, which rarely abandon their dominant recitative-like rhythm. All the voluptuous languor suffusing the composition is expressed in the study of delicate sfumatura in the prevalent mother-of-pearl sonority of the female voices. Nevertheless, it is typical of Gesualdo to refuse the technical limitation, not to want to deprive himself of the additional expressive possibility offered by the two lower voices, even if they are reduced to nothing more than the faintest trace of *chiaroscuro*.

If Gesualdo's relationship and reaction to the music of Luzzasco remain by and large unclear, his stylistic derivations from Jacques Wert appear more evident. Wert, another pupil of Cipriano de Rore, had enjoyed continual and intense relations with the Estense court in the preceding decade. His frequent trips to Ferrara from Novellara or Mantua, where he was in the service of the Gonzaga, were brusquely interrupted in 1589 as a result of information that revealed his secret motive, a grand passion for one of the Estense singers, Tarquinia Molza. Duke Alfonso's extreme reaction – Molza, too, had been forced to leave the court and withdraw to Modena – made it impossible for anyone in the Estense milieu to mention the musician, who was Flemish by birth but Italianized by his many years on the peninsula. Naturally, Wert, too, had composed for the trio of ladies. A particularly notable example, published in 1586, the period when Wert most often visited Ferrara, is the madrigal *Non è sì denso velo*. In this, or in some of Wert's other compositions, Gesualdo could have found any number of suggestions to take up, such as the near monochromatic quality of the three highest voices, isolated at the beginning, as in *Ecco morirò dunque*, then almost parsimoniously punctuated by the restrained intrusions of the two lower voices. Another is the rapid passage of ascending notes, which in Gesualdo's *Arde il mio core* conjures up the image of licking flames, and here, in a prolonged passage, evokes the flight of an arrow. Finally, the way in which the melody at the beginning shoots up forcefully with the leap of an octave, almost a flash of blinding light searing

through fog and veil, is highly characteristic of Wert and undoubtedly would have impressed the Prince profoundly.

Wert was one of the first and certainly the most fervent of the musical interpreters of octaves from *Gerusalemme Liberata*. A composition inspired by the passage in *Canto XII* describing Tancredi's visit to the tomb of Clorinda appeared in Book VII of Wert's madrigals, which came out in 1581, a few months before Tasso's poem was even published. To begin with, the narrative carries on in a monotone in an obscure and almost dispassionate recitative, «deprived of color, of warmth, of motion», the purpose of which is to increase the effect of the unexpected eruption of the cry and melisma in the passage describing the sudden gushing of tears. No less impressive, even before the eloquence of the hero's peroration, is the uncommonly naturalistic rendering of an «Alas», called languid in the text, but translated into music with a violent descent to the lower register, first by one isolated voice, then by all voices together.

Unlike Wert, Gesualdo rarely undertook the composition of narrative texts. One example in his Book I is *Tirsi morir volea*, a skillful but not very characteristic tribute to the frivolous fashion of one of Guarini's texts set to music by innumerable madrigalists. The only narrative example among the compositions of the Ferrarese period – those of Books III and IV of madrigals – is instead on a text that one might tentatively define as spiritual. The hesitation derives from the fact that *Spargea la morte*, even though it probably alludes to the death of the Redeemer, does not go beyond the embittered description, half realistic, half symbolic, of death. It is not a comment on its religious and human significance, and Gesualdo turns it into a scene of pale and dim light, a monochrome. Its recitative insistence has a notable affinity with that of the beginning of Wert's madrigal after Tasso, but the uniformity, unalleviated by the outburst of a contrasting passage, finds variety only in subtle harmonic pointing and the chromatic inflections of the melody.

The repetition of entire, long passages, frequent and typical in Gesualdo's music, has a particular justification in *Spargea la morte*, serving to prolong the static effect of tragic horror. This gives the madrigal an unusual length, in contrast to the typical nervous terseness of Gesualdo's style. Another version of the poetic theme proposed by Wert's octave is the beginning of the madrigal *Io tacerò*, but the contrast between the sonorous image of silence, the gloomy recitative, the high sudden proclamation of the «tears and sighs» of the text, seems here reduced to its quintessence, compressed into the course of just a few bars. Its passage is so brief that the economy of the composition required it to be repeated, and since the artist realized that the effect of the initial surprise was unrepeatable, the repetition based on the same harmonic scheme intensifies the general sonority but renounces the violent contrast of the timbral colors.

All things considered, whether it be Luzzaschi or Wert, it seems evident that the Prince of Venosa tended toward models that may have been in fashion in Ferrara a decade earlier, but which no longer suited the mood and inclination now prevalent at the Estense court. Seeing them proposed anew by a 'Neapolitan foreigner', courted and flattered but not loved; seeing them proposed anew above all with the intensity, pretension and arrogance that were characteristic of the Prince of Venosa's manner, could not have facilitated his relationship with the Ferrarese milieu, even in the artistic field – and we have seen what importance that held for Gesualdo. Nonetheless, there was more in those old-fashioned manners and attitudes than mere proof of backward provincialism. Whatever Duke Alfonso may have thought about it in his melancholy ivory tower, or Count Fontanella in his worldly scepticism, the Prince's response to poetic themes, formulas of performance, and mannerisms of composition was dictated by authentic affinities or idiosyncracies of temperament and personality, which were neither backward nor progressive, but stronger and more decisive than any passing fashion.

### **3. The Pastoral of the 'I'**

Our information regarding Gesualdo's life for the period of almost twenty years from the time of his marriage to Eleanora d'Este in 1594 until his death in 1613 is summary at best. Up to 1597 the couple, while occasionally visiting their Neapolitan dominions, lived mainly in Ferrara, where their son was born. Named Alfonso, he was to be the sole product of their union. The Prince participated enthusiastically in the pleasures of the Estense court – festivals, tournaments, hunts, visits to various places of delight and of *villeggiatura* – until Duke Alfonso II's death radically changed everything. On the day of his death, 27 October 1597, the Prince was in Naples, and he arranged for his wife and son to join him before the end of the year. On 28 January 1598, Ferrara was consigned to Cardinal Aldobrandini and forever ceased to be the brilliant capital of the Estense dominion. Cesare d'Este withdrew to the dominions of Modena and Reggio. In the following years, Eleonora d'Este visited her brother several times in Modena, but she was never accompanied by her husband, whose relationship with the house of d'Este was deteriorating. In Modena people whispered about the Prince's wayward behavior toward his wife.

Eleonora, already middle-aged at the time of the wedding, was ten years older than Gesualdo, and there is no doubt that he was often unfaithful. When they lived in Ferrara, gossip spread about the amorous adventures that the Prince sought in the lower ranks of society, and his testament includes provisions for a bastard son. But were these the real reasons for his quarrel with the Duke of Modena? Or was it rather because the hopes that both parties had placed in the alliance had failed? In point of fact, it was always the presumed victim, Eleonora d'Este, who resisted the proposed dissolution of the marriage, even after the death of their only son Alfonsino in October 1600.

The Prince's letters from this period often refer to his ill health, the physical suffering caused by his insistent cough and asthma. In the church of Gesualdo is an altarpiece dating from the first years of the 1600s with a portrait of him looking frail and sickly. Among the many rumors spread about him, one was repeated with insistence – that he subjected himself to flagellation in order to relieve his physical and psychical suffering. The Prince was already known for his melancholic disposition before arriving at Ferrara, and even without sure proof we can easily believe that during the last years of his life it grew into a gloomy obsession about physical misery and sadism. On the other hand, he was not spared by events, which struck him where he was most sensitive, in the pride in his lineage and the hoped-for assurance of its continuity. Besides little Alfonso, Don Emanuele, too, his first-born son from the union with Maria d'Avalos, died without a male heir a few months before his father in 1613. The Prince's hopes were concentrated on the yet unborn child of his son, although the terms of his will foresee with bitter lucidity the case, which in fact came to pass, that it might be a female.

From the time of his return from Ferrara in 1597, the Prince devoted himself to emulating the musical splendor of Duke Alfonso, and this was partly responsible for the accusations of excessive prodigality levied against him at Modena. Gesualdo surrounded himself with a brilliant musical constellation, which included, besides Scipione Stella, who had accompanied him to Ferrara (and who would soon retire to a religious life), Scipione Nenna, Muzio Efremer, Giovanni Macque, Bartolomeo Roi, Giovanbattista di Pavolo, Rocco Rodio, Scipione Cerreto, Giustiniano Forcella and Domenico Montella, «most excellent composers, players and singers», whom the Prince «for his penchant and entertainment, kept at his court at his expense» (as one of them wrote in 1601). One has the impression that Gesualdo was aiming higher – to affirm and renew the values of a specifically Neapolitan musical tradition in composition and theory. In such an academy under his authority he probably pontificated with the polemical intensity that we have come to know well on a theme that was then the topic of impassioned discussions – the past, present and future of the musical art. We can but try to guess what his opinions were. Perhaps one could summarize them with the motto *Musica vaga e artificiosa*, the title of a collection published later by the Roman Romano Micheli, one of the musicians in his service. Gesualdo's *Mottetti* for six voices, published in Naples in 1603, are also described in the title as «composed with singular artifice». But the full significance of the two adjectives «vago» [graceful, beautiful] and «artificioso» [skilful, full of art] is clarified in a passage by a contemporary Roman gentleman, Vincenzo Giustiniani. «The Prince of Venosa», he wrote, «began to compose madrigals full of much art [*artificio*] and perfect [*esquisito*] counterpoint, with imitations that were complex and graceful [*vaghe*]... And because this perfection of rule would occasionally render the composition hard and harsh, he used every effort and diligence to

find imitations that, even though difficult to compose, were *ariose* and turned out sweet [*dolci*] and fleeting [*correnti*].».

One of the compositions closest to Giustiniani's descriptions is the madrigal *Ardita zanzaretta* of Gesualdo's Book VI, in which the frequency of the contrapuntal cues – or, as they were called then, *fughe* – is justified by cues in the text, by the insect flying, fleeing, incessantly returning, a courtly trifle, a series of buzzing *petits riens*, more aptly qualified as fleeting than sweet.

*Ardita zanzaretta* belongs to Gesualdo's latest phase of madrigal composition. No madrigal of his is known that can be securely dated to the end of the sixteenth-beginning of the seventeenth century, that is to the years – if we have surmised correctly – in which the Prince took a polemical stand against the mainstream, turning to the most severe counterpoint and demanding that it vie with the apparent naturalness and spontaneity of monody.

But perhaps it is not by chance that Gesualdo's activity in this period appears particularly concerned with religious composition, in which the tradition of imitative polyphony was more deeply rooted. Beside the abovementioned collection of motets for six voices, a volume of motets for five voices appeared as well in 1603. A large selection of these is accessible today in an excellent modern publication.<sup>10</sup> Gesualdo's religious phase was not motivated by reasons of personal atonement, as generally assumed; rather, it had an artistic purpose. In the motet *Peccantem me quotidie* the contrapuntal structure is evident at the beginning with the single voices entering one after another in succession, with a brief, inward melodic gesture, dramatized by harmonic dissonance. Then, although the composition, like almost all in the collection, proceeds in an uninterrupted succession of episodes of imitative polyphony, its contrapuntal structure is concealed for the ear by the richness of the harmony or by the occasional emergence of melody in one or another voice. Above all, the contrapuntal structure is outweighed by the expressive significance of the whole.

Books V and VI of the Prince of Venosa's madrigals were published within a few weeks of each other in 1611, fifteen years after Book IV and eight years after the two motet collections of 1603. The fact that they were published at Gesualdo, by the printer Giangiacomo Carlino (who had styled himself archiepiscopal printer during Cardinal Gesualdo's lifetime), suggests that the Prince was trying to emulate the former Duke of Ferrara to the point of setting up his own musical printing-shop in his castello. Contrapuntal technique figures prominently in Gesualdo's last two madrigal collections, but it is no longer the dominant preoccupation, as in the motets, and in general it is used in a much more varied polyphonic context than that of *Ardita zanzaretta*. For a typical example of a «sweet and fleeting imitation» we can turn to a madrigal from Book V, *Mercè, grido piangendo*, in which it forms a twice-repeated

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<sup>10</sup> In GESUALDO 1957-1967.



episode, associated significantly with the entreaty “sweet treasure of love” [*dolce d’amor tesoro*]. The treatment of the initial movement of the text is not new: «Mercy, I cry, weeping, but who listens to me?» [*Mercé, grido piangendo; ma chi m’ascolta?*], a choral declamation varied in inflection. But also worthy of attention is the character of passages like the one immediately following, on the words «Alas, I faint» [*Ahi lasso, io vengo meno*], or the other, on the final exclamation «I die» [*Io moro*]. In these passages, the voices separate to form a genre of counterpoint, radically different from that of the «sweet and flowing imitations», but no less different from the typical counterpoint of Gesualdo’s latest style. We could define it as a counterpoint of recitative, since its substance is no longer the play of sonorous images in movement but rather the contrapuntal multiplication of the emotional intensity of the declamation.

The problem of the stylistic affinity with the works of other masters arises also in this latest phase of Gesualdo’s art. Once again we must mention the name of Luzzaschi, whose *Seconda scelta* of madrigals was published in 1613 by Giangiacomo Carlino, the Prince’s printer. An example from this collection shows how different the tone is from that of the music Luzzaschi composed for the Duke of Ferrara and his singing ladies.<sup>11</sup> There are a great many analogies and resemblances with Gesualdo’s style in the madrigal *Itene mie querele* – in the choral quality of the initial phrase, in the sudden contrast produced by the fugato on the subsequent text «precipitate a volo», in the passages of seamless linear chromaticism. However, as a whole it lacks Gesualdo’s persuasive force of dramatic tension.

There is no doubt that Luzzaschi was a pliant and wily artist. But what was his true nature? Luzzaschi died in 1607, and in all likelihood these madrigals would have been lost if the Prince of Venosa’s tenacious loyalty had not seen to their posthumous publication. Yet it is difficult to decide if it was Gesualdo who was influenced by Luzzaschi, or rather if it was the enigmatic Ferrarese master who complied with the Prince’s tastes.

The character of Gesualdo’s relationship with Pomponio Nenna is clearer. Nenna was one of the musicians of the Neapolitan group closest to Gesualdo on account of his long familiarity, age and artistic stature. As a personage, Nenna, too, has come down to us incomplete because of the loss of several collections of his madrigals, so that after Book I we jump to Book IV, published in 1609 and clearly post-Gesualdian. In it, Nenna appears as a gifted and modern musician. He is aware of all the Prince’s chromatic and contrapuntal boldness, and even the choice of texts of his Book IV seems strongly influenced by Gesualdo’s preferences. But the analogy is merely superficial. Nenna’s personality is serene, almost ingenuous, without spiritual crises or internal conflicts, pleased with his technical mastery and absorbed in the virtuostic predominance of choral scoring. Among his madrigals, *Ecco, mia dolce pena*

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<sup>11</sup> As Anthony Newcomb observed, the works in the *Seconda scelta* are drawn almost entirely from Luzzaschi’s Books IV through VI, published in 1594-1596 while Gesualdo was in Ferrara.

from the 1609 collection is one of those in which the most daring chromatic modulations appear most natural and effortless, and the densest accumulation of moderated dissonances seem a savory, plump, sonorous impasto.

There is a reflection of Nenna's sonority in a madrigal of Book VI, *Ardo per te*, which in other respects is among Gesualdo's least successful. It is the harmony that fills the words «moro per te, mia vita», with torment. And it is impossible to consider the resemblance accidental because the chordal structure and the special arrangement of the voices occur more than once in Nenna's madrigal on almost identical words. As we said, the composition is not one of Gesualdo's happiest because of the risky play of contrasts of its text, resulting in an almost unbearable repetition of words:

<i>ARDO per te, mio bene, ma l'ARDORE spira dolce aura al core;</i>	[I burn for thee, my love, but the burning inspires sweet aura to the heart;
<i>MORO per te, mia vita, ma il MORIRE gioia divien, dolcissimo il languire.</i>	I die for thee, my life, but the dying becomes joy, the languishing very sweet.
<i>Felice sorte, ancor ch'io ARDO e MOIA l'ARDOR divien dolce aura e l'MORIR gioia.</i>	Happy fate, that I still burn and die the burning becomes sweet aura and the death joy.]

In the music, it leads to a clustering of various expressive moments without a real sense of perspective, and the final repetition introduced by the musician, almost a coda, of the exclamation «Felice sorte! felice sorte!» is not sufficient to correct it.

At the opposite extreme for clarity of formal organization we have *Moro, lasso, al mio duolo*, also from Book VI. Three lines in the poem are translated into three distinct musical moments: a desolate succession of chords descending by semitones; a lively fugato (the flash of hope); a slow movement of declamation. The sequence is repeated on a different tonal level and with variations that reawaken interest without concealing its identity, and sealed by the close that briefly ascends, it hovers without forcing the tone and recedes in a slow counterpoint of chromatic inflections. The formal module is classic: strophe, antistrophe and *epodo*; but it is born of a genre whose poetic conception nominally relates to content; it is born, therefore, not of a formal tradition but from the intuition of a *cursus*, to which the musical images also must submit; it arises from an oratorical intuition, recitative in a broader sense than usual.

The Prince of Venosa's position, which can be defined as anti-literary, is explained by his overcoming the content-based experience, by his organizing the expressive detail in a broader conception of the musical discourse. His preference for anonymous texts without literary pretension is more than ever accentuated in the madrigals of the final period. The briefer they are, the less they impose a particular form on him, the less they limit his freedom to shape them especially by way of one of his favorite procedures – the repetition,

literal or varied, of the shortest fragment or of the most complex succession. He has no use for either the variety or the high finish of the images; all he wants is that they suggest and alternate the fundamental notes of pain and joy, of loss or hope, leaving it entirely to the music to strengthen or moderate the tone, to render the transitions gradual or sudden. Some have wanted to recognize a psychopathic obsession in the frequency with which the image of death occurs in the texts chosen by Gesualdo. But in the style of the period, death is merely a hyperbole for pain, keen and unexpected or relentless and bitter. This is how the musician interprets it, sometimes endeavoring to attenuate the emphasis. Very beautiful for its chaste decorum is the madrigal *Io pur respiro in così gran dolore*. From the faltering and interrupted murmuring of the beginning to the desolate chromaticism of the conclusion, it translates into sound a pain that is dull and motionless, an amazed stupefaction, a spiritual oppressiveness of sorrowful surprise.

So measured an awareness of innermost and secret suffering is hard to reconcile with the romantic image of a Gesualdo dragged by the turmoil of emotions into artistic adventures that were rash and ill-suited to his expressive means. At every stage of his career we have seen him aware, curious about new experiences but careful to adjust them to his own expressive purpose, a supporter of controlled spontaneity, of difficult ease. The control of a lucid will in the last madrigals strips the Gesualdian polyphony of every extravagance and blemish, reducing every element to the barest essential.

The clear characterization of the lines, the contours, the episodes, the precise perception of their hovering in time and space, are all traits of the *stile concertato*. What, then, kept Gesualdo from taking the step that Monteverdi had already taken in 1605, adding that flexible element of harmonic accompaniment to his music, the *basso continuo*, which in the *stile concertato* creates the atmospheric background and binds the various, individual voices and instruments to one another? It was neither the lack of boldness nor stubborn ostentation of traditionalism. More likely, it was the result of his constant habit of mentally reading his music. We have seen that since 1594 the Prince would «show his works in score to everyone to make them marvel at his art». In 1613, shortly before his death, Gesualdo had all six books of his madrigals republished and rededicated, collected in one volume and – something unusual for the period – in *score*. This does not mean that he did not have the circumstances and results of real performance in mind when he composed; but the habit of hearing internally and mentally, which for a musician is more intense, purer, more perfect than any actual performance, could have attributed psychological resonances to the concertante gestures of his music that led him to feel the physical resonance of an accompaniment of the *basso continuo* was unnecessary.

Moreover, this is not the only way in which the Prince withdrew from reality in order to seek refuge in the haven of his imagination. His art has but a single theme: love. One could say that he was romantically in love with the

whole ceremony of romantic courtship, of broken promises, provocative denials, revived hopes. Life gave him nothing but disappointments, conjugal incomprehension or amorous adventures that were too easy, degrading to the intellect. And still the dream persisted to the end. Indeed, in his last years the dream was renewed through a joyful exaltation, unknown in earlier phases. It may be that the singing ladies of Ferrara returned to visit the musician Prince in his solitary meditations, amidst spiritual afflictions and bodily torments, no longer as Lucrezia, Tarquinia, Livia or Laura, but as Filli, Licori or Amarilli, ideal creatures more beautiful in fantasy than in real life, wiser, even crueler in inflicting the gentlest pains of love. Creatures of an imaginary and more perfect world, representatives of a unique reality, the fearful isolation of the 'I' completely absorbed, too absorbed, in itself.

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