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“SECONDA PRATICA”: A BACKGROUND TO MONTEVERDI’S MADRIGALS

BY DENIS ARNOLD

ALTHOUGH studies of Monteverdi’s life and music have appeared in the last thirty years in Italian, English, German and French, we still know comparatively little about the background from which his music sprang. A recent work on his operas¹ has admittedly explored this in some detail, and Einstein’s great book on the Italian madrigal has made it possible to compare Monteverdi’s style with that of the other great madrigalists. These apart, we have virtually nothing. This lack of comparative studies would not be very important in considering a composer of either the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries: we all know enough music of these times to avoid the more obvious errors of appraisal. But few know any music at all of the early seventeenth century, and anything that is more generally known seems to be the revolutionary—the monody and early opera, the *concertato* motet of Viadana and so on. Against this sketchy background, it is not surprising that Monteverdi stands out as one of the extremists. Indeed, his contemporary Artusi accused him of being one as early as 1600, so that more recent scholarship has tended to follow this trail. That Monteverdi defended himself by claiming to descend from a strong tradition has been largely ignored as the conventional defence of any modernist.

Yet if we are to understand the Artusi-Monteverdi polemic we must try to have a picture of the situation as it appeared to the participants and know something, perhaps, of the participants themselves. We have found out little enough about Artusi, and that little must be gained from between the lines of his books. At the time of the quarrel he was probably approaching middle age and was living at Bologna. This city, lacking any of the brilliance of a court, can have had little importance for musicians in 1600. Its principal musicians were probably employed by its largest church, San Petronio, and although they were aware of recent developments in church music, they had little interest in the madrigal. Its conservative atmosphere is well reflected in Artusi’s early theoretical writings. His first was an elementary textbook, ‘L’arte del contraponto’, published in 1585. In it he professes no originality. “I have

¹ A. A. Abert, ‘Claudio Monteverdi und das musikalische Drama’ (Lippstadt, 1954).

judged it well to follow the usages of the moderns, and in particular that of the Very Reverend Gioseffo Zarlino", he declares in a note to the reader. We may well raise our eyebrows at the thought of Zarlino as a modern, even in 1585; but the term is, of course, to be contrasted with the "ancients", or Greeks. It is Zarlino's support of counterpoint and refusal to have anything to do with speculations of how Greek music sounded which makes him a "modern". In fact, Artusi's book teaches counterpoint in the manner of the church musician of some twenty years earlier. The innovations of the madrigal composers are completely ignored.

By 1589 Artusi was ready with a second part to his textbook. In this he has obviously lost some interest in teaching beginners and starts off with an explanation of the nature of dissonance. Again, there is nothing new in his approach, which can be found in the works of several other theorists of the century, and more especially Zarlino. But here Artusi begins to be on the attack. It is some composers which he describes as *moderni speculativi* that are causing the trouble, and one or two dissonant progressions by these come in for severe treatment. "Modernism" has come to take on its usual abusive significance. Artusi, as is usual in these circumstances, takes his stand on the firm statement that "the senses and the reason together must be the arbiters" (of taste).

All the same, we are hardly prepared by this for the massive and extensive attack which Artusi made on some madrigals of Monteverdi eleven years² later. Perhaps the setting he gives to this later book is not without significance. Artusi (or so he says) had been over to Ferrara for a wedding, and while he was staying there he was invited to an informal concert in a nobleman's house. At the concert, which Luzzasco Luzzaschi attended, some unpublished madrigals were performed, madrigals which by their very sound must have convinced Artusi that here was one of the worst of his *moderni speculativi*. It required no more than the trouble to obtain copies of these puzzling works to give Artusi strong grounds and incentives for his attack. Now Ferrara, although only a few miles from Bologna, was so different from Artusi's home town that it is hardly surprising that so conventional a musician should have found something there at which to be shocked. For many years the court of the d'Este family had been one of the centres for advanced composers. In fact, ever since Vicentino had built his chromatic *archicembalo*, Ferrara had been the home of experiment and innovation. Rore and Luzzaschi had worked there as court composers;

² Extracts given in Strunk, 'Source Readings in Music History', pp. 393ff.

Lassus and Marenzio undoubtedly became more interested in chromaticism after their visits; Gesualdo’s extreme manner dates not from his violent homicide but from his connection with Ferrara through his second wife, a member of the d’Este family. Only Mantua, a rival court indeed, could keep up with this reputation, and there were found a similar group of composers—Monteverdi, Wert and Benedetto Pallavicino being the most important. And of these Mantuan composers at least the first two had links with Ferrara. Monteverdi dedicated his fourth book of madrigals to the Accademia degli Elevationi, and would have done so to Duke Alfonso d’Este if this nobleman had not died; Wert not only dedicated a madrigal book but had actually spent some time in Ferrara and had unsuccessfully tried to marry one of its most famous musicians, Tarquinia Molza. In fact, Artusi’s visit may be compared with a first visit to Paris of a provincial organist who happened to go to the first performance of ‘Le Sacre du Printemps’. He was amazed, horrified and angry. No wonder his book shows signs of heat.

To follow Artusi’s attack point by point would be as tedious as it would be useless. Wrapping up his argument in the usual appeals to classical authorities, he finds Monteverdi guilty of almost every crime. But his main assault is undoubtedly on Monteverdi’s free use of dissonance. He understands how these new combinations have come about—his exposition of the various short cuts which Monteverdi has taken from ordinary suspensions to unprepared dissonance is almost as good an analysis as can be found—but he cannot condone them. The omission of passing-notes and the additions of ornaments are, to him, no excuse. These chords “cannot be made into sweet and new harmonies because they have not by nature their smoothness and sweetness”, he proclaims. There is no relativity of consonance and dissonance. There is one absolute, arithmetical standard, and Monteverdi has not recognized it.

Monteverdi’s reply is much more interesting. We possess it only in outline, printed first as a foreword to his fifth book of madrigals and later amplified by his brother in the ‘Scherzi musicali’ (1607); but the very brevity of its form gives it a force which would have been lost if covered with the usual quotations from classical philosophers and theorists. It goes at once to the heart of the matter. There are two manners of composition, he claims, one laid down by Zarlino and supported by Artusi; and a new “second practice”.

By Second Practice, which was first renewed in our notation by Cipriano de Rore . . . was followed and amplified, not only by the gentlemen already mentioned [Rore, Cavalieri, Fontanelli, Bardi,

Turchi, Pecci] but by Ingegneri, Marenzio, Giaches de Wert, Luzzaschi, likewise by Jacopo Peri, Giulio Caccini and finally by loftier spirits with a better understanding of true art, he understands the one that turns on the perfection of the melody, that is, the one that considers harmony not commanding, but commanded, and makes the words the mistress of the harmony.³

The list of composers is almost as interesting as the basic idea, and the importance of the Ferrara-connected composers comes out at once. Rore, Gesualdo, Marenzio, Wert and Luzzaschi have already been mentioned. To these we may add Count Fontanella, who was *maestro di camera* to Cesare and Alfonso II d'Este.⁴ The other composers, it will be noticed, are nearly all Florentines and members of the famed *Camerata* (Pecci, a Sienese, may have had connections with this). Ingegneri is, it is true, an isolated figure, put into the list mainly because he was Monteverdi's teacher. We shall also include two composers in this discussion who are not in the list. One is Pallavicino, almost certainly excluded by Monteverdi for personal reasons, although by style an important member of this group, and included among them in a similar list drawn up by Banchieri in 1608.⁵ Another is Sigismondo d'India, probably unknown to Monteverdi, but again having close stylistic connections with the group.

Quite apart from links of place and time, these composers have something in common. As far as we can discover, they were all intellectuals, interested in the theories of music current in the learned academies. Some of them, Gesualdo, Bardi and Galilei, were hardly more than amateurs in conventional musical techniques. But certainly all of them would have heard of Monteverdi's basic tenet of faith, for his demand that the words should be "the mistress of the harmony" was no new idea. An echo of Plato, it had been a demand of almost every sixteenth-century theorist. Its interpretation is necessarily complex. At the simplest, there is the demand for the words to be audible. We know the *camerata* theorists were especially interested in this, and Caccini's strictures on the "laceration of the poetry" by imitative counterpoint are well known. Even Zarlino, whose own compositions seem undisturbed by this requirement, agreed that audibility of the text was desirable, and yet impossible: "with a multitude of parts and with so many singers and instrumentalists in the manner which we use at the present

³ Strunk, *op. cit.*, pp. 408-9. The spelling of the names has been altered according to modern practice.


⁴ 'Codici Estense', I. H. 4.

⁵ 'Conclusioni nel suono dell'organo', 58.

time, it is impossible to hear anything but a noise of mixed voices making different sounds. . . .”

The results of these theories in the music of the early monodists are so well known that we need hardly discuss them here. What is not always realized is that these ideas had affected the work of several composers of madrigals two or three decades before 1600. The first sign of this is in the homophonic texture which is constantly used. Already in the 1560s Wert was composing madrigals which avoid contrapuntal devices in order to make the declamation clear.⁶ Luzzaschi⁷, Pallavicino and Pecci follow much the same style in several madrigals, while for almost half of Giovanni del Turchi’s lament for Jacopo Corsi the same syllable appears at the same time in all the voices. But this by itself would not be more than we could say for much “non-academic” music of the century. The true significance of homophony in these passages lies where we consider their declamation. Audibility depends also on the way in which syllables are given stress and length. This also the theorists, including Zarlino, recognize, and the French musicians especially had explored new metric systems. The Italian composers, though not really interested in *musique mesurée*, had a great interest in making their declamation exact. The term “choral recitative” has been applied to some of Wert’s madrigals.⁸ It could equally be used to describe passages by most of the composers of the group. In contrast to the methods of the contrapuntal style, the madrigalists tend to repeat notes in the melodic line to accommodate the syllables at something approaching the rhythm and speed of speech. As a rule one syllable is given to a note, the exceptions being occasional melismas used for reasons we shall discuss later and elisions which crowd the syllables into even shorter note-values:

Ex. I WERT: USCIVA HOMAI

Cantus 

E sco-ten - do del vel l'hu - mi-do lem - bo

This in turn tends to break up the steady rhythmic beat. In Palestrina’s music, the *tactus* is of the utmost importance in the musical structure. It is controlled completely by musical necessities. In some of these madrigals the words control the rhythm to a

⁶ See Einstein, ‘Italian Madrigal’, III, No. 68.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, No. 82.

⁸ Einstein, *op. cit.*, II, 516ff.

tremendous degree, though it is true that only Monteverdi goes to the length of disrupting the musical rhythms completely, as in 'Sfogava con le stelle', where psalmodic notation appears. Still, the beginning of the following madrigal shows how little contrapuntal rhythms are used:

Ex. II PALLAVICINO: ERA L'ANIMA MIA

C
A
T
B

E - - ra l'a - ni - ma mi - a Già

pres so à l'ul - tim' ho - re

These discontinuous rhythms appear even where homophony has been forgotten. Many motifs to be worked contrapuntally show these repetitions of the notes and the great contrasts of tempo implied:

Ex. III FONTANELLI: MORO E DE LA MIA MORTE

Cantus

Mo - ro e de la mia mor - te

Other composers use dotted rhythms as yet another device to come nearer to speech rhythms and to give variety to the declamation. But whatever the method, it is remarkable how near some of these madrigals come to the rhythms and methods of recitative. A change in notation, and several would appear typical monodies.

This is only one interpretation of Monteverdi's dictum. More important still was the idea that the meaning of the poem must be

given by the music; and here we have a major disagreement. Some composers were quite content to use the poem as a series of images and to “paint” with a naturalistic brush. Wert, for example, wrote a number of delightful country sketches with suggestions of bird songs and all the usual symbolism of “high” and “low”. Nor was Monteverdi himself a despiser of such aids, as his delightful madrigal ‘Ecco mormorar l’onde’ shows.

Nevertheless, the ideas of Galilei prevailed among the academics. Galilei insisted that the concept of “imitation of nature” should mean a “metaphorical” rather than “literal” interpretation of the words. Although no doubt the idea originally was that mime should replace literal musical interpretations in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, it is clear that both composers and theorists began to see that emotional expressiveness had far-reaching possibilities that “natural” tone-painting lacked. All theorists admitted this to some extent. Zarlino himself suggests the use of the harmonic and rhythmic changes to convey the changing mood of the words, and the more advanced Vicentino agrees with him. But it is precisely at this point that the differences between conservative and *avant-garde* begin to appear. Zarlino declared that although dissonance might be used to express cruelty and other similar emotions, the dissonance itself must never be so harsh as to offend the hearer, nor overstep the rules of contrapuntal suspension and resolution. For the moderns this view defeats its own ends. Harshness is harshness and must be so depicted in music. And this is the start of the arguments between Artusi and Monteverdi.

Unusual harmonies and melodic intervals had been involved at the very beginning of a humanistic music. The early theorists, and especially Vicentino, had conceived the dual purpose of recreating not only the Greek *affetti* but also Greek techniques. Since much of the Greek philosophy of music is taken up with physical explanations, it was natural for the sixteenth-century theorists to explore the old methods of tuning, the chromatic and enharmonic *genera* and the rest; and although these discussions seemed sterile to certain theorists who wisely saw that the problem of modern music had to be solved by modern means, yet studies in the chromatic remained of interest to many composers. In fact, one of the strongest links between the composers mentioned by Monteverdi is that they all use some form of chromaticism. Rore had been one of the first to experiment with it, in a famous setting of a Latin ode. Luzzaschi was using chromatic scales in the 1570s for highly dramatic ends.⁹ We have

⁹ ‘Quivi sospiri’, reprinted in Einstein’s ‘Golden Age of the Madrigal’.

already quoted a chromatic motif from a madrigal by Fontanelli, and it is no harder to find examples in the music of Wert or Pecci. Gesualdo's usage is too well known to need discussion here, and Marenzio, although not given to using chromatics very often, based the whole of the opening section of his setting of Petrarch's 'Solo e pensoso' on a *canto fermo* of rising semitones. As for Ingegneri, it is difficult indeed to find any trait which justifies his inclusion in Monteverdi's list. His music is for the most part conservative and based on firmly contrapuntal lines. So it is with relief that the historian finds a chromatic passage in his motet 'Jerusalem surge'¹⁰ to give a link with the more modern composers.

From here it is not far to the use of unusual and difficult melodic intervals for purposes of expression. Pallavicino was especially fond of this. His madrigal 'Lunge da voi' begins with the motif containing an octave leap, a natural expression of the words perhaps, but one which gives an extremely tense flavour to the opening section as all five parts use it. The same composer's 'O come vaneggiate' gives the bass a downward leap of a tenth to add to the recitative-like opening phrase:

Ex. IV

Bassus

O co - me va - neg - gia - te

Monteverdi's famous use of the downward sixth leap, which H. F. Redlich finds so emotional¹¹, can be found in Pallavicino's 'Era l'anima mia' and 'Lunge da voi', coming at such a pace that singers of the time must have been taken aback:

Ex. V

ERA L'ANIMA MIA

Cantus

Co - me se' tu, cor mi - o

Another free use of the sixth is to be found at the opening of Rore's 'Crudele acerba inexorabil morte', this time in the most difficult form for a singer, the ascending major sixth. But even when the intervals used are not in any way unusual in themselves, these composers can give force by combining them in an angular way.

¹⁰ Reprinted in J. Wolf, 'Music of Earlier Times', p. 93.

¹¹ Claudio Monteverdi, 'Life and Works', p. 71.

Wert’s setting of ‘Solo e pensoso’ (the text appears to have been something of a test piece for extremists) has a melodic line which is astonishing both for the performer and the listener, who has its full force thrust upon him by the imitations throughout five voices:

Ex. VI

Bassus

So - lo e pen - so - so j più de - ser - ti cam - pi,

i più de - ser - - ti cam - pi

Zacconi, discussing this madrigal a few years after its publication shows how difficult this music was considered at the time¹²; but he throws in some common sense when he points out that it is possible to find difficulties of this kind even in old-fashioned masters such as Josquin and Obrecht. To us it is clear that the technical details are not particularly novel. The newness lies in the use of such melodic harshness for the purposes of verbal expression. The melody has indeed become a servant of the words.

To reinforce the extreme melodic angularities, it was to be expected that composers should turn to equally stringent harmonies; and perhaps it is not so surprising that Artusi concentrated his attack on Monteverdi’s practises, as the other composers of the group are admittedly less severe than he was. Nevertheless, it is clear from their work that they were in advance of their contemporaries. They obey the law of suspension and resolution, but incline to extreme measures within the rules. Rore tends to use the harsher intervals, such as the major seventh, rather often. Pecci goes farther and likes to hold on the note of suspension while its resolution is sounded. At times strange chords will come into existence by means of clusters of passing-notes, and dominant harmonies become particularly strong. Fontanelli produces a last inversion of the dominant-seventh effect which obliterates every convention about the tritone; and Pecci has no fears about similar progressions brought about by passing-notes:

¹² *Prattica di musica*, Part II, Chapter 54.

Ex. VII (a) FONTANELLI: MORO

A

T B

Che ron si do - - - gli a ghi - me

(b) PECCI: AMOR IO PARTO

S

A

T B

Pallavicino's harmonies are sometimes still more extraordinary. As a rule he relies on extensions of the suspension principle, using unusual intervals to match the strangeness of the words:

Ex. VIII LUNGE DA VOI

C 5

A

8 Un la - cri - me - - -

8 - vol suo - - - no

Occasionally he goes still farther and uses unprepared dissonances of great force. The opening of his setting of 'Cruda Amarilli'¹³ is, like Monteverdi's, a landmark in the history of harmony and was closely followed by d'India¹⁴, who, being a younger man, dares to

¹³ Quoted by Einstein, *op. cit.*, II, p. 853.

¹⁴ See 'I Classici Musicali Italiani', Vol. X, No. 4.

give it a chromatic twist. In fact, Pallavicino’s setting is for the most part more dissonant than Monteverdi’s. The few bars of the latter which aroused the ire of Artusi are easier for the ear to understand than much of Pallavicino’s madrigal, Monteverdi’s strangeness coming mainly from a written-out ornament, a slide or *portamento* which makes its clashes with the other parts more casual and less sustained than in the older man’s work.

We need not pursue other matters in detail. The use of false relations, pedal effects and so on were all grist to Artusi’s mill, but enough has been said to show the essential relationship of Monteverdi to the other *seconda pratica* composers. Like them all, he was a true “academic”, taken up with classical ideas and willing to defend his principles by references to Platonic theory. How deeply these affected him can be seen from the very length of his interest in them. In the second decade of the seventeenth century, when the monodic battle was won and the “new music” was firmly launched on new paths almost completely independent of the theorists, Monteverdi was exploring classical rhythms and composed a major work, ‘Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda’ to illustrate his intellectual conception. Twenty years later, when he was over sixty, and everyone else was interested in writing songs and motets which had a completely non-academic basis, Monteverdi was still thinking of writing his book on the *seconda pratica*, a book which would then have hardly been practical, however well it would have sold some twenty-five years earlier.

So his style is based in these humanistic principles. He was interested in exact declamation, and many of his madrigals from Book III onwards use the “choral recitative”, culminating, as we have mentioned, in ‘Sfogava con le stelle’ in Book IV. He uses unusual intervals in the melody, very much in the ways of Wert and Pallavicino, following large leaps by yet further movement in the same direction, or leaping sixths and sevenths without giving the singer any time to prepare for the shock. Chromaticism is not one of Monteverdi’s main interests, but it would have been difficult for him to achieve such a freedom of modulation without a knowledge of the work of Rore and the rest. His dissonance treatment is also based on the conventions developed by the advanced composers; and he goes beyond them by cutting out the stage of “preparation” to which they, for the most part, adhere.

Monteverdi was right, then. He belonged to a tradition which was firmly established by 1600, a tradition founded by some of the most respected composers of the sixteenth century. But we are still

left with our questions. Why did he seem so original to Artusi? And why does he appear to the modern listener to have a style so completely sure and coherent when so many of his contemporaries are only experimenters? One thing we must take account of is his lack of interest in the esoteric for its own sake. He never writes with the pen of a Gesualdo, for whom chromaticism seems like a child's new toy. Instead, Monteverdi conceives of chromatic harmony as an extension of the diatonic style, to give new modulations rather than destroy tonality. Yet at the same time his sparing use of the new resources is a consistent one, each new trait occurring often enough to make it feel natural to the composer. The large melodic intervals as used by Pallavicino always remain something of a freak, somehow too daring to be true. Monteverdi's leaps of a sixth, on the other hand, become almost a cliché. We can feel a definite style in his work; and if the individual traits are never his own invention, their synthesis is. Monteverdi was an "academic", but never a dry-as-dust, and his musical instinct rarely played him false. Perhaps Artusi, in his heart knew this. If he had attacked Wert or Pallavicino, should we ever have heard of him?