

Musical Radicalism - The Late Madrigals of Gesualdo

By the middle of the twentieth century, the musical idea of “modernism” was laden with baggage. Ever since the implications of Wagner’s never-resolving chromaticism were felt, a tumultuous century of musical innovation had overseen the birth of the twelve tone technique and total serialism, not to mention the development of numerous new musical languages from jazz to expressionism. By the end of the second world war, the very nature of what it means for music to be “modern” was a central question to western art music. The Enlightenment ideal of a string of linear “progress” had frayed; Stravinsky, the formerly quintessential modernist composer, was nearly in his third decade of writing neoclassical works while Boulez was declaring as “useless” those who had not “experienced the necessity of dodecaphonic music” and Cage was in the first stages of exploring music based on chance. Clearly, it was now pointless to conceptualize a direct line from the perceived conservative old with the radical new. With this breakdown in the identity of the modern concept came a search for new models and the implication that they could very well be found in old sources. So began a renewed interest in the music of Carlo Gesualdo, a composer that broke the mold of this false dichotomy.

Gesualdo, born in 1566, was the prince of the Italian city of Venosa and a composer of vocal music. The biographical detail, though, that had ensured him a footnote in history prior to the rediscovery of his music was his double murder of his wife and her lover after he caught them in the act.¹ After his music had faded from the repertoire, what little popular conception of Gesualdo remained was one of a mad prince whose morbid tendencies colored the strange music he wrote. However, when modern composers renewed their consideration of early music, they found in Gesualdo works of extreme intrigue. Indeed, Stravinsky orchestrated some of his

¹ Bianconi, Lorenzo. “Gesualdo, Carlo, Prince of Venosa, Count of Conza.” Grove Music Online. Oxford University Press.

madrigals and the polemical Boulez considered his music forward-thinking enough to program it alongside contemporary works in his own concerts.² Gesualdo's name quickly became tied with the avant-garde and interest in his music continues still, but strangely enough it has baffled decades of analysts seeking to understand it. Harmonies that seem closer to Wagner than Monteverdi abound. Phrases are cut off unexpectedly and the structures of individual pieces are often vague to the point of obscurity. Putting the features of Gesualdo's music into context to determine exactly how much of an innovator he was is a challenge that has eluded a definitive answer, but this paper will attempt to use several different perspectives taken toward different aspects of Gesualdo's madrigals to put forward a view in which his music is modern precisely because of its idiosyncrasy; in short, I believe that neither the individual theoretical aspects of Gesualdo's approach to harmony, text setting, structure, or the relationships between them are sufficient to explain the radicality of his music, but rather the integration of all these disparate parts into a cohesive, individual musical personality.

By the 16th century, the madrigal was a sort of catch-all term for musical settings of sonnets, canzoni, and other forms of lyric poetry. Sources of texts ranged from Petrarch to contemporary writers and the gravity of the music, measured in polyphonic density and seriousness of expression, was equally varied. The eclectic form of the madrigal largely faced no serious stylistic challenges until the advent of the *seconda pratica* as initiated by Monteverdi. New madrigals written in the 1590's and onward contained treatments of dissonance that were attacked as heretical by theorists such as Artusi; now, the music of the madrigal was subordinated to the text to which it was set. Luzzachi, Marrenzio, and Monteverdi himself

² Roger Nichols, "Pierre Boulez Obituary," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, January 6, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jan/06/pierre-boulez>.

published madrigals in the new style; however, the madrigals of Gesualdo were “from the beginning more extreme in every way”.³

Indeed, the madrigals of Gesualdo (especially those of the final book, written in 1611), are exemplary of his personal style and by far his most well-known works. This paper will focus on two madrigals from Book VI as models- “Moro, lasso, al mio duolo” (“I die, alas, in my suffering”) and “Io pur respiro in così gran dolore” (“I still breathe through such immense pain”). A brief discussion of selected excerpts from these two madrigals will convey their uniqueness-

The image shows a musical score for five voices: Soprano I, Soprano II, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The Soprano I part is a whole rest. The other parts begin with a C# major chord (C#4, E4, G#4) in the first measure, followed by an A minor chord (A3, C4, E4) in the second measure, then a B major chord (B2, D#3, F#3) in the third measure, and a G major chord (G2, B2, D#3) in the fourth measure. The lyrics are: Soprano II: Mo - ro las - so, al mio; Alto: Mo - ro las - so, al mio duo-; Tenor: Mo - ro las - so, al mio duo-; Bass: Mo - ro las - so, al mio.

The infamous opening of “Moro, lasso”. The first 5 measures present a series of what, in functional terms, would be called chromatic mediant relationships. A C# major chord precedes an A minor chord, followed by B major and G major. This obviously does little to give away the prevailing mode; it isn’t until this passage is finished that A aeolian is felt. This strange series of chords reoccurs in various versions several times throughout the madrigal, each time a jarring harmonic detour with little context.

³ Kurt Fischer, “Madrigal,” Grove Music Online (Oxford University Press).

S
gran do-lo - re E tu, e tu pur vi - vi, pur vi- vi, e tu

A I
gran do-lo- re E tu pur vi - vi, pur vi - vi, e tu pur

A II
gran do - lo - re E tu, e tu pur vi - vi, pur vi-

T
E tu, e tu pur vi-vi, pur vi -

B
E tu, e tu pur vi -

Measures 13-17 of “Io pur respiro”. In the first measure of the excerpt, a D major chord occurs over a pedal G, which falsely “resolves” to a minor seventh chord before finally landing on an inversion of E minor. The stretto entrances of “pur vi” in measures 16-17 present additional features of Gesualdo’s music, namely abrupt shifts of texture and dense imitative counterpoint. Compare these excerpts to the following from Palestrina’s madrigal “Alla riva del tebro”-

S
go pa-sto - re, gio - va - net - to vid' io, va-go pa- sto - re;

A
re, gio- va-net- to vid' io, va - go pa-sto - re;

T
re, gio - va - net - to vid' io, va- go pa-sto - re; man -

B
va-net - to vid' io, va - go, va-go pa - sto - re; man-dar tai

Here, the only chromatic embellishment is an A/Ab ambiguity as the final is recontextualized between Bb and Eb and the texture is relatively homogeneous and consistent. Admittedly, this madrigal was written about 20 years before “Io pur respiro”, but the stark contrast demonstrates just how different the latter is from the former. Both “Moro lasso” and “Io pur respiro” contain

many examples of the strange hallmarks of Gesualdo's writing, including seemingly inexplicable harmonic movement, fragmented textures that shift on a dime, unprepared and unresolved dissonances, and chromatic density. Also worth noting is the morbidity of the text and the way it is depicted; for example, the opening line of "Moro lasso", translated as "I die, alas, in my suffering", is programatically treated with a descending chromatic line accompanied by the haunting, strange triads that are functionally unrelated to each other. Per seconda pratica style, such "madrigalisms" are especially pervasive in the music of Gesualdo, often to the extent of throwing the structure of an individual piece into ambiguity with the expressive and unique treatment of separate sections of the text.

Undoubtedly, the most immediately arresting aspect of the late madrigals to a modern ear is the tendency towards dissonances and chord progressions that bring to mind the language of Wagner at the earliest. Thus, there has been a proportional interest to explain or contextualize Gesualdo's harmonic language using various analytical methods. The harmonic idiom of Gesualdo's own time was a modal one, so it makes sense to begin by looking at the composer's approach to modality. In fact, it is clear that Gesualdo himself perceived his music as ultimately modal; according to the following table, taken from an article by Zhuqing Hu, the last book of madrigals was arranged in order of mode per the theory of the Renaissance-era Italian theorist Zarlino.⁴

⁴ Hu, Zhuqing (Lester). 2015. "Towards Modal Coherence: Mode and Chromaticism in Carlo Gesualdo's Two Settings of O Vos Omnes." *Early Music* 43 (1): 63–78.

<i>Madrigal no.</i>	<i>Tonal type</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Mode no.</i>
1-3	b- G2-G	Dorian	1
4-5	k- G2-D	Hypodorian	2
6-7	k- C1-E	Phrygian	3
8-10	k- G2-E	Hypophrygian	4
11-12	k- G2-F	Lydian	5
13-14	k- G2-G	Mixolydian	7
15-17	k- G2-A	Aeolian	9
18-19	b- G2-F	Ionian	11
20-22	k- G2-C	Hypoionian	12
23	b- G2-G	(Dorian)	(1)

Gesualdo exercised great care over the publishing of his works, so this modal ordering was clearly an intentional choice. However, trying to analyze the “chromaticism” of Gesualdo’s madrigals with Zarlino’s conceptualization of the term presents a contradiction. As Hu points out in the same article, Zarlino’s theory provided for the alteration of notes as a recontextualization of the mode. For example, the previous excerpt of “Alla riva del tebro” by Palestrina is consistent with Zarlino’s ideas, “modulating” between modes on Eb and Bb as indicated by the flat or natural A. However, if this use of chromaticism can be thought of as horizontal, then Gesualdo’s application is vertical. The theory of Zarlino, even if Gesualdo considered it valid enough to use it as a structural ordering element, has no way to explain a passage like the opening of “Moro lasso”. Here, notes that are considered chromatic in the context of the A Aeolian mode are not arranged in a way that accommodates the voice leading of one part in its movement to another area, but are consequences of a triad whose chromatic elements span multiple parts. Zarlino’s conception of chromaticism also worked mostly within modes that were already close together, either sharing species or different by a note. A C# major triad does not belong into a mode with such a relationship to A Aeolian, again the mode that Gesualdo himself considered the actual mode of the piece. Even more glaring is the presence of chromatic scales

across multiple voices in measures 5 through 15 of “Io pur respiro”, a section of which is shown below-

S
in co-si

A I
do-lo- re, in co - si gran do - lo - re, in co-si

A II
in co - si gran do-lo- re, in co-si gran do - lo - re, in co-si

T
re, in co-si gran do-lo - re, do - lo - re,

B
in co-si gran do-lo - re

Here, chromaticism is clearly the focus of the line rather than a consequence of modal interchange. It exists in a vacuum, serving the expressive needs of the text.

Other analysts, noting contradictions like these, have proposed other ways of interpreting the chromaticism in Gesualdo’s music. For example, Joseph Ian Knowles in his “Modality and Chromaticism in the Madrigals of Don Carlo Gesualdo,” constructs the following two-octave disjunct chromatic scale from pitches in “Moro lasso” in a combination of ideas from Greek species of the octave into tetrachords and set theory.⁵

In his paper, chromatic passages from the madrigal are analyzed by their interval structure in and

⁵ Knowles, Joseph Ian. “Modality and Chromaticism in the Madrigals of Don Carlo Gesualdo,” 2014. <http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/10127/9/Volume%20I.pdf>, 126-136.

between voices and comparing sets of pitches between them. Approaches such as these are effective in capturing why departures from the theoretical idiom of Gesualdo's day are able to produce compelling music. In fact, Knowles claims that through his analysis, "Gesualdo has created a cadence, striking beyond precedence, in a controlled manner, that is not only modal, but also chromatic, unified through the use of diatesseral units and a fundamental consistency in interval structure." However, it is important to note that approaches such as this do not imply a consistent theoretical system of Gesualdo's own construction—of course, he did not employ applications from set theory centuries before their invention. Rather, the necessity of such hybrid systems to explain the intuition of the composer's musical constructions leads to a view of Gesualdo's harmony as a purely individual phenomenon, serving his own expressive ideas and those of the text by following his ear and whatever structures were suggested by his mind, conscious or not.

Clearly, Gesualdo's harmony cannot be perfectly described by a comprehensive theoretical system and there is some dichotomy between passages that are basically modal and ones that are chromatically inflected to various degrees. Oftentimes, these sections are distinctly blocked off from each other. Being *seconda pratica* writing with notes that "are the mistress of the text", it follows that the harmony of a Gesualdo madrigal can be better understood in its structural context. More than perhaps any contemporary madrigal composer, Gesualdo's music is tied directly to the structure and content of its text with individual phrases receiving specific and individual treatment. Michael F. Burdick, formerly of the IU theory department, uses two structural ideas, phrase painting and goal orientation, in order to explain (among other chromatic passages) the elusive chords of the opening to "Moro lasso". Even though the settings of each verse in "Moro Lasso" often contain chromatic elements, their initial and final notes follow a

largely diatonic scheme. Many times, it is the directionality created between the initial and final notes that allows for chromaticism to appear; furthermore, by viewing the first and second chords of the “chromatic mediant” interruptions as part of separate phrase painting blocks, the discontinuity disappears.⁶ In addition, the smaller phrases are overridden by the larger goals implicated by the verse. Burdick identifies a relatively consistent pattern between the starting and ending points of each verses in “Io pur respiro”-

<i>initial</i>		<i>final</i>	<i>intervallic relationship</i>
e	Io . . . dolore,	G	↑3rd
a	E tu . . . core!	f [#]	↓3rd
a	Ahi . . . spene	e	↑5th
e	Di . . . bene!	G	↑3rd
d	Deh . . . aita!	f [#]	↑3rd
(?)b	Uccidi . . . vita,	D	↑3rd
C	Pietosa . . . solo	G	↑5th
C	A la . . . duolo.	E	↑3rd

The consistency and symmetry of the intervallic relationships present here suggest some planning by the composer. An analysis of those in “Moro Lasso” is similarly consistent. If this is the case, then it is possible to further explain some harmonic oddities. For example, the aforementioned minor seventh in “Io pur respiro” makes sense if reinterpreted as a Bb major triad at the end of one phrase overlapping with a G in the bass at the beginning of a new phrase. Of course, not every chromatic passage in a Gesualdo madrigal can be explained as a result of a structural choice, but it may be that the sense of harmonic fragmentation often felt in the music can be thought of as a consequence of textual and structural fragmentation.

Accordingly, the balance between expression, musical subordination to text, and structure should be considered an important if not primary element of Gesualdo’s radical style. Again, as an artist of the *seconda pratica*, the text drives the music. However, taking this idea to its extreme

⁶ Burdick, Michael F. "Phrase Painting and Goal Orientation in Two Late Gesualdo Madrigals." *Indiana Theory Review* 5, no. 2 (1982), 18-30.

and eliminating musical considerations naturally leads to incoherence. A central challenge to the school of the *seconda prattica* was the question of how to best bring out the expressive potential of the text while retaining a digestible musical structure to impose it on. Clearly, Gesualdo was willing to go further than his contemporaries in his pursuit of the text, and multiple examples of both text painting and attempts to reconcile it with the music abound in the late madrigals. An important tool in Gesualdo's arsenal in maintaining musical continuity, according to John Turci-Escobar, is cadential attenuation. Cadential attenuation, the weakening of a cadence through various means in order to prevent a sense of constantly starting and stopping, is an effective way to blend together settings of blocks of texts that deal with different phrases and occasionally even different harmonies. Of particular pervasiveness in Gesualdo's madrigals are cadential evaporation and cadential distortion. The former gradually eliminates voices leading up to the final note of the cadence and the latter diverts the goal of the final notes elsewhere from what would otherwise result in a perfect cadence, respectively lessening the gravity of the cadence or injecting it with additional momentum to carry onto the next verse. Such cadences are often cleverly woven into the music with the dual purpose of erasing discontinuity and expressing the text.⁷ "Felicissimo sonno" from Book V contains an evaporated cadence that fades away in parallel while setting a line that depicts eyelids closing in the act of falling asleep. Another madrigal from Book V, "Itene, o miei sospiri", fittingly contains an evocation of "gran duolo" (or great pain) in the middle of a distorted cadence. In addition to individual instances of collaboration between structure, music, and text, Gesualdo employs large scale structural events that coordinate the three on the scale of an entire piece. One of the most striking of these can be found by comparing the beginning and ending of "Io pur respiro". The large ascending chromatic

⁷ Turci-Escobar, John. "Softening the Edges: Cadential Attenuation in Gesualdo's Six Books of Madrigals." *Theory and Practice* 32 (2007): 101-35, 108-119.

scale that snakes through all five voices during the initial 15 measures of the piece is mirrored by a similarly large descending scale at its close, a reflection of the dramatic arc of the text which begins with a pained, striving declamation (“I still breathe through such immense pain/and you still live, o pitiless heart?) and ends with a defeated resignation (“Wound me mercifully, put an end to life and to this great suffering.”). Such wide, integrative ideas as these are emblematic of the virtuosic way in which textual, structural, and musical elements are reconciled with each other in the late madrigals.

We have now built up to this idiosyncratic approach that defines Gesualdo’s music. The compositional philosophy in how musical and extramusical materials should be related to each other is the wellspring from which all of the other elements, from the harmony to the counterpoint to the structure, burst. Thus, it is at the root of what makes him a radical, both in a historical and modern context. The contemporary reception of his music supports this accordingly; Gesualdo was at times both decried and acclaimed for his particularly engaging counterpoint, “beautiful rule-breaking” with regards to harmony, and his imaginative approach to text setting.⁸ This idiosyncrasy makes sense in the context of Gesualdo’s life as well. Financially well-off as a prince by birth and reclusive by nature, he had little connection to the publishing establishment. Although he was undoubtedly informed of the theoretical practices of the time (we have seen his familiarity with Zarlino) and of the music of contemporary composers, Gesualdo was essentially free to write exactly according to his own desires with little pressure to conform to an expected model of how things should be done with regard to any particular musical parameter.⁹

⁸ Deutsch, Catherine. "Antico or Moderno? Reception of Gesualdo’s Madrigals in the Early Seventeenth Century." *The Journal of Musicology* 30, no. 1 (2013): 28-48, 47.

⁹ Arnold, Denis. Gesualdo. London: British Broadcasting Corp., 1984, 1-15.

Returning to the beginning of “Moro lasso”, the alien opening chords now ring as radical in a different way. The harmony is still as striking as before, but knowing its place in the context of the individual phrase structure, then for example considering the implications of goal orientation on its direction, then finally thinking of it as a single necessary cog of the structure created by the text setting paints a different picture. If something is radical because it is set apart in some way, then the integrative, unique nature of Gesualdo’s music is radical simply by the strength of its identity, hence its rediscovery in the modern age—after the second World War, concert music faced a crisis of expression, and with the choice paralysis of a wide range of dogmatic styles came a natural attraction to music that follows its own rules. For this, the late madrigals, where elements successively point upward in a ladder towards the composer himself rather than a school or an aesthetic ideal, are nothing if not a perfect model.

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