

## The Madrigal in Late Renaissance/ Early Baroque Italy

The madrigal was the most important type of secular music in Italy throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Italy became the most important musical centre in Europe as a result of the madrigal, and for the first time in history. For our purposes, the madrigal can be defined as follows:

‘A through composed musical setting of a short poem’.

This is a vague definition, but the madrigal is a generic term, encompassing a variety of poetic types: sonnet, balata, canzone, ottava, rima, and poems written expressly to be set to music as madrigals. Most texts set as madrigals consisted of a single stanza with a free rhyme scheme. The madrigal dealt freely with the verses of the poem through a variety of textures, in a series of (usually) overlapping sections, some contrapuntal and some homophonic, each based on a single phrase of the text. The most important job of the madrigal composer was to try to match the tone of the poem correctly, and to reach the listener with its ideas.

The development of the madrigal was obviously heavily bound up with the texts set, and was subject to the tastes and fashions of the times. Petrarch (1304-74) was the poet most commonly set by madrigal composers. Most of the works from 1520-50 were set for four voices; after the middle of the century five voices became the normal setting, but settings for more voices were not uncommon.

Most madrigal texts were sentimental or erotic in subject matter, with scenes and allusions borrowed from pastoral poetry.

The most important madrigal composers of the later 16<sup>th</sup> century were:

\* Orlando di Lasso (1532-94)

- \* Philippe de Monte (1521-1603)
- \* Giaches de Wert (1535-96)

De Wert was a Netherlander, but spent most of his working life at Mantua, in the service of the Gonzaga family, where he was in close contact with the musical circles of the d'Este court at Ferrara; Mantua and Ferrara formed an axis around which many of the most significant events in the history of the late 16<sup>th</sup>-century madrigal turned. De Wert's secular music – 11 books of madrigals for five voices, a collection of light *canzone villanelle*, and a handful of madrigals printed in various miscellaneous collections – makes up the largest part of his complete works.

The first three books of 5-part madrigals contain his youthful compositions, written before he went to Mantua in 1565. Books 4-6, published in 1567, 1571, and 1577, during his first 20 or-so years at Mantua, show him to be a composer similar in many ways to Cipriano de Rore (1516-65), one of the most important earlier composers of madrigals. In de Wert's madrigals, as in Rore's, technical artifice was usually subservient to textual expression (consistent with contemporary neo-Platonic thought). Textures used included dense imitative counterpoint, homophony, polychoral dialogue, choral declamation, simple diatonic or highly chromatic lines.

The last five books of madrigals (1581-95) show a marked increase in the composer's willingness to underscore literary meaning at the expense of following the rules of polyphony. This was the start of this widespread practice, brought to its apex by Monteverdi.

Luca Marenzio (1553-99) was a virtuoso madrigalist who spent most of his life in Rome, but had contact with other Italian musical centres, including Mantua, Ferrara and Florence. Unlike the Mantuan and Ferrarese madrigal composers, Marenzio wrote mainly for the pleasure of the performers themselves, not for courtly audiences. De Wert is



of his life, Gesualdo was a very gloomy figure, and this became worse after the scandal of 1590.

Gesualdo's first two books of 5-part madrigals were published in Ferrara in 1594, but were written some time before this date. These volumes show very accomplished compositions, but in a conventional style. Books 3 and 4 were published in 1595 and 1596, and reflect the influence of Ferrarese composers. These volumes show his experimental nature, and how far he was to go in fragmenting textures and juxtaposing wildly contrasting elements within a short space of time. These books also show his striking chromatic progressions.

Gesualdo largely rejected the texts of the established poets that most of the important madrigalists chose to set. Instead, he chose to set undistinguished literary figures. Within a period of ten years at the end of his life, five volumes of Gesualdo's works appeared: two volumes of motets (the *Sacrae Cantiones* of 1603), and his responsories for Holy Week, and Books 5 and 6 of 5-part madrigals, all printed in Gesualdo (he was named after the place) under his direct supervision.

Gesualdo's sacred music is more traditional than his madrigals: the polyphony is less chromatic, and more free-flowing. However, the motets are highly expressive. The last two books of madrigals are the ones that established Gesualdo's reputation as an eccentric composer (e.g. *Moro lasso*, from Book 6): the pieces are highly chromatic, and sometimes even sound atonal.

Monteverdi is best known for his operas and sacred music, but he produced a sizeable output of madrigals, too. It has been suggested (by Denis Arnold) that Monteverdi 'tackled and solved what he conceived to be the problems of the composer' in his madrigals (*Monteverdi*, p. 46), and worked using this medium for 50 years. Some of his madrigals were written for the performance of amateurs, and others were designed for

virtuosos, to be heard by an audience. Monteverdi's madrigal output shows an extraordinarily wide variety of musical techniques, and to understand this output properly, it is necessary to relate the music to its intended audience, and thereby to consider its function.

Monteverdi's first book of 5-part madrigals was published in Cremona (Monteverdi's birthplace), in 1587. These evoke pastoral moods, and frequently show a 3-part texture. The madrigals in Book 1 are mainly light-hearted, and the attitude to the poems set reflects this, being either lyrical or pastoral. These pieces are considered to be undistinguished, but show that Monteverdi had learned the main conventions of madrigal composition (e.g. the chromatic change to express 'lasso' ('alas'), triple time for 'gioia' ('joy'), the rest which represents a sigh before 'deh' ('ah') or 'sospiro' ('sigh')). Monteverdi had also learned the use of dissonance to represent the pains of the lover. These early pieces by Monteverdi closely resemble the madrigals of Marenzio, de Wert and contemporary Venetians such as Andrea Gabrieli. Books 2 and 3 were issued in 1590 and 1592, before Monteverdi had become Maestro di Cappella at Mantua (de Wert was still the leading musician there at the time). These two books are considered transitional in style, mainly because the fourth and fifth books, published in 1603 and 1605, show Monteverdi's complete absorption of the musical styles of the northern courts. These two books also contain the best examples of the polyphonic madrigal.

Harmony is treated in a distinctive way in Monteverdi's madrigal books. *Cruda Amarilli* is the madrigal which caused the controversy between Monteverdi and Artusi over the *seconda prattica*. The highest voice (called the superius) enters after a rest on an unprepared dissonance and then leaps to another dissonance. Monteverdi famously responded to Artusi's attacks in the preface to Book 5. This defence was continued by Monteverdi's brother, Giulio Cesare Monteverdi, in the preface to Claudio's *Scherzi musicali* of 1607. This second practice makes the text in piece the most important factor, and the music is subordinate to this text. This was not a new statement in 1607, and Cipriano de Rore would have

subscribed to it – in fact, Monteverdi names Rore as the first exponent of the *seconda prattica*, whose followers he lists as Ingegneri, Marenzio, de Wert, Luzzaschi, Peri and Caccini.

Luzzaschi, de Wert and Monteverdi all worked in Mantua or Ferrara during important times in their lives, and the musical culture there strongly influenced the work of Gesulado (Neapolitan), and the Roman Marenzio. The high artistic standards of these courts had a significant effect on the development of the Italian madrigal. These two courts were as important as Florence (the birthplace of opera and monody) in determining the development of music at that time.

Monteverdi's Book 4 is generally considered to be his finest collection of madrigals, because of the expert way in which he handles chromaticism and dissonance treatment in the sad pieces. There are, however, a number of happier pieces in the volume, too. The fourth book was successful, and was reprinted in 1605 and 1607. Book 5 was published soon afterwards in 1605, but many of the pieces were probably written at about the same time as those of the previous book, as *Cruda Amarilli* (from Book 5), was apparently known from about 1598.

One of the most important factors of Book 5 is the fact that a basso continuo is supplied. For over half the madrigals, this is not necessary; however, it is essential for the last six pieces, which are therefore different in technique. It is important not to overestimate the immediate effect in sound of this, because earlier madrigals were often performed with an instrumental accompaniment. However, the conscious use of an accompaniment changes conceptions about the genre, and these madrigals are new in a stylistic sense. One of the main stylistic changes in Book 5 was the elimination of the lighter canzonet style: the highly serious Book 4 had some lighter numbers, but the pieces in Book 5 *without* basso continuo (in a more conventional style) are all sad. The main choice of text is Guarini's *Il pastor fido*, and more specifically, the laments of the

various lovers. This creates a vehicle for extreme emotionalism. It is this emotionalism which gives Monteverdi the licence to use much more dissonance and treat false relations more unusually.

The basso continuo was a ground-breakingly important 'invention' of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, in a number of different ways. In a practical sense it allowed pieces deliberately written only a few solo voices to have a complete harmonic accompaniment, without the music sounding weak or thin. It also allowed for the cheap production of keyboard music; a very important consideration when printed music was still very expensive and a choir might require many copies. In addition to these practical considerations, there were important academic reasons for the emergence of basso continuo. Florentine academics, including members of the Camerata, believed that they were reviving the music of ancient Greece, and to do this they required a harmonic accompaniment to support sung monody. With the removal of polyphony, the text was clear, and, centrally to the tenets of the *seconda prattica*, could move the spirit of the listener. The attempt of these academics was to revive the spirit of Greek music, but the achievement was really a new type of music for the court. The nature of monody was to glorify the virtuoso, and, at the north Italian courts, the means were available to satisfy this.

When Monteverdi first embraced basso continuo in his madrigals (the last six of Book 5), it was typical of him that he saw it as a new technical means rather than for the fulfilment of lofty intellectual criteria. These first basso continuo madrigals are, in many senses, more conservative than many from Book 4. In this newer type of piece, melody is especially important, and much use was made of ornamentation. On top of this melody a second voice could enrich both harmony and sonority.