

Carlo Gesualdo di Venosa
Sacrae Cantiones – Book II (a 6 e 7 voci) - 1603
Reconstruction and performing edition by James Wood - 2009



INTRODUCTION

Background

Carlo Gesualdo (c.1560 – 1613), Prince of Venosa, is perhaps most famous as *this great if disequilibrated composer*¹ of dissonant and chromatic madrigals, and the aristocrat who murdered his first wife and her lover *in flagrante delicto* in a bout of vengeful jealousy. Yet further research reveals a nobleman of colourful, extravagant and yet devout character, an amateur lutenist, harpsichordist and guitarist, and a composer of avant-garde and intensely expressive music.

The traumatic events which led to his desperate acts of murder took place in October 1590. In 1594 he married Leonora d'Este from the noble family of Ferrara² and was taken into their court there. The couple had one son, but the marriage (which had been arranged without their prior acquaintance) was not a success, and Gesualdo soon began to mistreat Leonora.

Around 1597 he returned alone to his castle in Gesualdo. Leonora eventually joined him, but, because of the regular abuse she suffered at his hands, did not stay with him the whole time. Gesualdo thus spent long periods in isolation, and became increasingly obsessed with feelings of guilt and remorse. These feelings, and his constant prayers for forgiveness were revealed in the almost obsessively penitential nature of the texts he selected for his sacred music and the extreme intensity of their musical settings. Soon after the unfortunate death of Gesualdo's and d'Este's son he

¹ Stravinsky

² The Court at Ferrara were known for having employed such eminent composers as Josquin, Obrecht, Isaac, Lasso and Willaert, and so Gesualdo became much inspired by this rich musical environment.

also commissioned an altar painting for the Santa Maria della Grazie convent in Gesualdo. The painting, *'Il perdono di Carlo Gesualdo'* by Giovanni Balduccio recalls the Last Judgement and shows Gesualdo kneeling in prayer in the lower left hand corner, with Jesus the Redeemer raising his right hand in absolution. Gathered all around are divine and saintly figures, including St-Francis, who Gesualdo adored³, St Carlo Borromeo (Gesualdo's uncle), St Domenic, the Archangel Michael and the Blessed Virgin Mary. All eyes are fixed on the Redeemer; most point fingers towards the sinner, Gesualdo. Meanwhile two mysterious figures, a male and female, are apparently being rescued from the flames of damnation, while the winged figure of an infant is innocently ascending above.

It was during this period of partial isolation that Gesualdo, already well known as a composer of madrigals, turned to writing sacred music. This included two books of *Sacrae Cantiones* printed in Naples by Constantino Vitali and published by Don Giovanni Pietro Cappuccio in 1603, and three substantial settings of *Tenebrae Responsoria*, for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday, published in 1611. He also left a large quantity of music in manuscript which contains some of his most daring experiments in chromaticism, as well as evidence that he was exploring the new monodic forms which were soon to flourish in the hands of Monteverdi.

The first book of *Sacrae Cantiones* is for five voices, and the second for six and seven voices. Tragically the *Bassus* and *Sextus* (alto) part-books for Book II have been lost, leaving what is probably the richest part of his sacred music incomplete and un-performable. Both books of motets contain music of consistently high quality – the music is at once tender and passionate, sublime and dark, with chromaticism and dissonance used to dramatic effect as Gesualdo explores extremes of emotion, guilt and pleas for forgiveness. Words such as *pain, weeping, sin, darkness, death, celestial light, intercession, forgiveness, and redemption* occur frequently in the texts, and although this was not uncommon in the sixteenth century, the obsessive frequency and emotional intensity with which these texts were set reached an extreme development in Gesualdo's music.

Reconstruction

Given the fact that these extraordinary qualities have always been clear to see in Book I of the *Sacrae Cantiones*, it has always seemed strange to me that the only attempt at a reconstruction of the incomplete second book to date has been Stravinsky's *Tres Cantiones Sacrae* of 1957-59. Written to commemorate the 400th Anniversary of Gesualdo's birth, even these were not intended to be reconstructions in any stylistic manner, as Stravinsky himself always asserted⁴. His typically provocative later remark

³ See *Sacrae Cantiones*, Book II, no. 18 – Francis, humble and poor, enters heaven rich and clothed in splendour, and he is honoured with celestial hymns.

⁴ Robert Craft writes: "Stravinsky has not attempted reconstruction. In fact he seems to have avoided what in some cases might appear to be the prescribed solution. What he has done is to recompose the whole from the point of view of his added parts, with a result that is not pure Gesualdo, but a fusion of the two composers. That is not to say that Stravinsky's additions are violations of Gesualdo's style. Gesualdo *could* have written everything that Stravinsky added... The point is that he probably would not have done so."

I find Craft's description of Stravinsky's work somewhat mis-leading, since Stravinsky did not alter anything in the surviving parts of the motets, but merely composed the missing parts so as to throw the existing parts into a new light. I would go further and say that Stravinsky's additions could certainly

(from 1968), “*Musicians may yet save Gesualdo from musicologists*”, is the all the more potent for the fact that Stravinsky wrote the preface to the biography of Gesualdo by his friend, the distinguished musicologist and authority on Gesualdo, Glenn Watkins⁵. However it does offer a glimpse of the principal problem facing any musician *or* musicologist attempting a reconstruction of these extraordinary motets.

My first attempts to complete some of the motets date back to 1977, when I was conductor of Schola Cantorum of Oxford. I reconstructed three motets – *Ardens est cor meum*, *Veni creator spiritus* and *Gaudeamus omnes*. My enthusiasm to complete them was driven by my love of sixteenth century music in general and of the music of Gesualdo in particular, and by the plentiful opportunities to perform them. As an external tutor in Techniques of Composition (then principally 16th Century Counterpoint) at Oxford University at the time I was well versed in the techniques and rules of sixteenth century counterpoint, and worked regularly with students in this domain.

However, the problems faced in reconstructing Gesualdo’s music are very different to those in the music of almost any other composer from this period, and present far greater challenges. The main reason for this lies in Gesualdo’s style of imitation, which although at first sight seems free and devoid of any logic, does in fact follow some fairly strict ‘rules’. Points are imitated not exactly, but the intervals between the notes of each Point and the rhythmic values of each note are almost always ‘stretched’ or ‘compressed’ so that in most cases the *contour* of the Point remains consistent even if the intervals and rhythms of each Point are altered. (See for example in *Verba mea* – the imitation of the first Point between all four existing parts).

The reconstruction of the missing parts relies fundamentally on finding solutions to each Point of Imitation (and each motet can contain upwards of 25 separate Points). But since the Points can vary so much, both rhythmically and melodically, with each Imitation, the number of possible solutions for each Point of Imitation is almost infinite in each instance. However it is my experience in undertaking this task that once a solution has been found that obeys all the ‘rules’, more often than not it is the only possibility. Very rarely have I encountered a situation where two or more solutions have presented themselves, thus awarding me the luxury of choice!

There are of course many other aspects of Gesualdo’s style which I have taken into consideration whilst reconstructing the missing voices, of which I could mention a few obvious examples: Gesualdo’s treatment of text is extremely consistent – syllabically treated text is almost invariably consistent in all instances, and melismatically treated text (or more often single words or syllables) likewise, even if the melisma takes some very different forms in each instance (for example *O Oriens*, the text *O Oriens* is always set syllabically, and the word *splendor* always melismatically). When two syllables are set to the same pitch, they almost invariably remain consistent in all instances (for example the word *Domina* in *Ave sanctissima*

not have been written by Gesualdo, and thus they *are* violations of his style. A fusion of the two composers’ styles, however, they are, and as such they remain neither pure Gesualdo nor pure Stravinsky – a quirky response by Stravinsky to a composer he must have found quite fascinating, despite his claim to have had little interest in sixteenth century motets!

⁵ Gesualdo: The Man and his Music, Glenn Watkins

Maria, bars 21-23). His treatment of dischords is again quite individual, but nevertheless consistent. The preparation of suspensions is not always restricted to one beat, but can often be for two beats (*Discedite a me*, bar 6-7, Ct, and bar 27, S). Unprepared suspensions are rare, but do occur sometimes (*Discedite a me*, bar 24, T2, and *Verba mea* bar 39-40, S), as are half-beat resolutions of suspensions (*Discedite a me*, bar 4, T1 and bar 11, Ct); whole-beat passing notes also appear (implied in *Ave sanctissima Maria*, bar 52, S); consecutive 5^{ths} and octaves do not occur except occasionally where a rest intervenes, although there are numerous examples of inverted consecutive 5^{ths} (*Ave sanctissima Maria*, bar 21, Ct/T2, and bar 60, S/T2). Dissonances and chromaticism are often used consistently together with certain words (for example the frequent suspensions on the word *iniquitatem* in *Discedite a me*, and the chromatic movement on the words *in tenebris et umbra mortis* in *O Oriens*, on the words *fletus mei* in *Discedite a me*, and on the words *lachrymans quaero* in *Ardens est cor meum*). The range of each voice rarely exceeds one octave and a fourth or one octave and a fifth at the most, but the range of corresponding voices in different motets can differ significantly.

Many other questions have been taken into consideration – permitted melodic intervals, wide leaps approached or quitted from within or outside their range, permitted rhythmic durations, consistency in the presence of root, third and fifth, which degrees can be doubled or tripled, treatment of seventh degree, instances of monophonic chordal setting, style of resolution of suspensions, vocal coloration of chords to suit text, etc - but a detailed analysis of these lies outside the scope of this introductory note.

My completions of the *Sacrae Cantiones* are based on the 1962 Glenn Watkins edition of the surviving four voices. At the time of writing I have not had the opportunity to view the original manuscript. There are a very few occasions where I have had to resort to altering what I believe must be a mistake in the original, whether that mistake was in Gesualdo's original or (less likely) in Watkins' transcription, and this is always annotated in the score.

Conclusion

As a composer, I have found the discipline involved in completing the motets following a set of 'rules' usefully complementary to my work as a composer. The only difference is that in the case of reconstruction of Gesualdo's music the 'rules' are defined by detailed analysis of his music, and the 'rules' employed in my own music are developed within my own compositional style with each work or period of works.

I cannot explain why it took me thirty years to resume work on this fascinating and richly rewarding project. But whatever the reason, I started again to work on the motets in the summer of 2008, this time with the aim of completing all twenty of them, including those 'fused' by Stravinsky. My work began with revising the three motets which I had completed in 1977, and then gradually working through the others. I am sure that during the course of rehearsal and performance in the coming years more revisions will be necessary, but I am nevertheless confident that these completions represent a significant step towards a stylistic reconstruction of what is an important part of the Gesualdo's sacred music, and which has lain unperformed for over 400 years. Hopefully the composer in me has "saved the music from the

musicologists”, but more importantly I hope that, by refusing to take the easy option of completing the missing voices in some ‘creative style’, the musicologist in me might just have saved the music from the ‘fusionists’!

James Wood, Berlin, February 2009 (Revision May 2009)

CONTENTS

1.	Virgo benedicta	a 6	SACtTTB
2.	Da pacem Domine	a 6	SATTBarB
3.	Sana me Domine	a 6	SACtTTB
4.	Ave sanctissima Maria	a 6	SACtTTB
5.	O Oriens	a 6	SACtTTB
6.	Discedite a me omnes	a 6	SACtTTB
7.	Gaudeamus omnes	a 6	SMsATTB
8.	Veni Creator Spiritus	a 6	SMsATTB
9.	O sacrum convivium	a 6	SACtTTB
10.	Adoramus te Christe	a 6	SACtTTB
11.	Veni sponsa Christi	a 6	SACtTTB
12.	Assumpta est Maria	a 6	SACtTTB
13.	Verba mea	a 6	SACtTTB
14.	Ardens est cor meum	a 6	SACtTTB
15.	Ne derelinquas me	a 6	SACtTTB
16.	O Beata Mater	a 6	SMsATTB
17.	Ad te levavi	a 6	SMsATTB
18.	Franciscus humilis et pauper	a 6	SACtTTB
19.	O anima sanctissima	a 6	SACtTTB
20.	Illumina nos	a 7	SMsATTBarB

Countertenor parts (Ct) can be sung either by countertenors, or by a combination of light tenor and low alto, or a combination of countertenor and low alto, as best suits the available voices