

THE ITALIAN MADRIGAL

The sixteenth-century Italian madrigal was the most important secular polyphony of its time. Roughly 2,000 books of Italian madrigals were printed between the genre's first appearance in the 1530s and the death of Claudio Monteverdi in 1643¹. The Italian madrigal repertory fused expressive, serious poetry by Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374) and polyphony that earnestly exposed the meaning and mood of its texts. Early madrigals were usually for four voices and featured straightforward textures and very subtle word-painting. Over time, madrigals were written for more voices, required more virtuosic singers, and employed more word-painting¹. This paper will discuss three significant madrigalists and a song by each: Philippe Verdelot's "'Italia mia, bench'el parlar,'" Cipriano De Rore's "Mia benigna fortuna," and Claudio Monteverdi's "Hor che 'l ciel e la terra."

As a preface, it is necessary to understand the importance of Francesco Petrarca (aka Petrarch) (1304–1374) and his impact on madrigalists. Petrarch was an Italian scholar, poet and one of the earliest humanists². He is often labeled the "Father of Humanism." Petrarch's sonnets were admired and imitated throughout Europe during the Renaissance and became a model for lyrical poetry². Renaissance composers, being so interested in the beginnings of humanism and applying them to composing, of course latched on to Petrarch's poetry as fitting within their musical frame of mind and at the very least, beautiful poetry to set to music. One of the earliest madrigalists to make

¹ J. Peter Burkholder, *Norton Anthology of Western Music, Volume 1: Ancient to Baroque*. 6th edition.

(New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2010).

² Robert M. Durling, *Petrarch's Lyric Poems: The Rime sparse and Other Lyrics*.

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976)

musical use of Petrarch's poetry was Philippe Verdelot.

Philippe Verdelot (1485–1552) was a French composer of the Renaissance, who spent most of his life in Italy. He is considered the father of the Italian madrigal, and was one of its earliest and most prolific composers. He was a prominent figure in the musical life of Florence during the period of the Medici family's power. Verdelot's style balanced homophonic with imitative textures and he rarely using word-painting. Most of his madrigals are for five or six voices. In 1526 he collaborated with Niccolò Machiavelli on a production of Machiavelli's famous cynical comedy *La Mandragola*. The several pieces which Verdelot wrote for Machiavelli's play, while called *canzone*, are considered to be the earliest madrigals ³. Verdelot's madrigals were hugely popular; they were largely reprinted and distributed throughout Europe in the 16th century ³.

“Italia mia, bench'el parlar” is an extremely patriotic Italian madrigal that pleads with God: “Governor of Heaven, I beg That the compassion which brought You upon earth May turn You to Your beloved, divine country” to stop war in Italy. It appears that the God Mars is the enemy who removes compassion and strength from hearts in Italy and causes Italy to suffer “numerous mortal wounds.” The text is in rime sparse form with no particular patterns or rhyme schemes. The line lengths are not very regular; in the first part of the verse, he addresses “My Italy” at first, which begins with an indentation. Afterwards, there are two long lines with adjectives and three shorter lines. Another indentation occurs when he addresses “Governer of Heaven.” All lines with adjectives are longer than others, but there is no particularly regular line length.

³ Alfred Einstein, *The Italian Madrigal*. Volume 1.

(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971).

The text's form is reflected in the musical setting, because like the text, the music does not repeat itself and is one complete singular piece expressing a whole idea. Being only one verse with no rhyme scheme or particular structure, the music follows suit and flows as one continuous piece. The texture is polyphonic as there are five different voices texted: the cantus, altus, tenor, quintus, and bassus and they all enter at the same time, on beat 1 of the first measure. There is a lot of homorhythm, most commonly between the top two and bottom two voices, while the middle (tenor) is often unique. There is little to no melodic imitation. However, beyond consistent homorhythm, there is also imitative rhythm. For example in measure 8, the altus sings a quarter followed by a dotted half note and three quarter notes. The cantus in measure nine follows suit, though begins with a half note. In measure 10, the tenor follows as well. There is almost always homorhythm between all the voices at the beginnings of phrases, such as "Che nel' bel." There are clearly no instruments required because all five parts are texted and labeled as voice ranges. This madrigal is in cut time or duple meter. There is no syncopation in the piece though there are some dotted rhythms, eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and whole notes. The rhythm is relatively straightforward, mostly comprised of quarter notes almost always starting on the first beat. In a couple spots, voices come in together on beat 2 instead such as in measures 65 and 78. The melodic style is mostly neumatic, though there are some syllabic and melismatic parts. Most of the notes each have its own syllable, especially at the beginning of phrases, such as the beginning of the first phrase and "Che nel' bel." A melisma occurs on the syllable "Ta" in the cantus and altus in measure 11. Another notable melisma is measures 18-19 in the bassus on the syllable "men" in "men' che." Cadences match phrase structure of the text. Each phrase cadences

and begins in homorhythm, usually cadencing on a half note and beginning on a quarter note. Phrases are for the most part unique to each other, though usually 2 instances of dotted quarter followed by an eighth note rhythms occur in each phrase and this occurs at some point within every voice.

Chromaticism is used first in measure 8 in the tenor on the words “sia indarno,” which translates to “[words] are useless.” Verdelot uses a sixteenth note b natural preceded by a c which lends emotion to the phrase. Chromaticism is used a handful of times throughout the piece and most commonly using a c to a b-flat in an eighth note pattern. The vocals range from a low f in the bass to a high d in the cantus. The music is not that difficult to sing as there are few leaps, the rhythm is straightforward, and the music is mostly syllabic and neumatic.

There is some word painting in the piece, such as on the word “mortal” in the cantus in measure 11, in which the first melisma occurs, emphasizing the vulnerability and pain felt by Italy. Also, the word “cruel” in “cruel war” is emphasized twice in both the cantus and tenor when there is a melisma on “del” in measures 61 and 62. There is no specific overall form because there is not a specific form for the text; there are no repeated lines, no rhyme schemes and no particular structure of line length. Musically, this is reflected as the voices do not repeat themselves either and there is no structure beyond unified beginning and cadenced phrases.

Cipriano de Rore (1515 or 1516 –1565) was a Franco-Flemish composer of the Renaissance, active in Italy. He existed as a living symbol of the generation of Franco-Flemish composers after Josquin des Prez who went to live and work in Italy and was also one of the most significant madrigal composers in the mid 16th century. His

experimental, chromatic, and highly expressive style had a decisive influence on the subsequent development of the secular madrigal. His early works are mostly for four or five voices, with one for six and another for eight ¹. The tone of his writing tends toward the serious, especially as contrasted with the light character of the work of his predecessors, such as Verdelot. This led especially to his use of Petrarch poetry. Rore carefully brought out the varying moods of the texts he set, developing musical devices for this purpose in addition to experimenting with chromaticism. He used all the resources of polyphony as they had developed by the middle 16th century in his work, including imitation and canonic techniques, all in the service of careful text setting ⁴.

Rore's madrigal "Mia Benigna Fortuna" sings of someone lamenting his or her misfortunes. Though it's not clear whether it is impending Death or an unmentioned heartbreak that has caused the marked new unhappiness and sorrow, the text grieves over the fate Death carries and the inescapable doom the writer/singer feels. Similarly to Verdelot's "Italia mia, bench'el parlar," there is no rhyme pattern, repeated verse, or particular line structure. However, there are two definitive parts to the madrigal: the explanation of the happy times once had, and the second part being the sorrow and weeping endured due to "Cruel, bitter, inexorable Death." The line lengths are roughly all the same, though the first lines of the two separate sections are shorter than the rest. The text's form is reflected in the musical setting, because like the text, the music does not repeat itself and is one complete singular piece expressing a whole idea.

Being only one verse with no rhyme scheme or particular structure, the music follows suit and flows as one continuous piece. This madrigal is polyphonic and written

¹ J. Peter Burkholder, *Norton Anthology of Western Music, Volume 1: Ancient to Baroque*. 6th edition.

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for an SATB (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) choir. The piece begins with the soprano singing a whole note on D, and after the bass enters on beat 2 of the first measure, polyphony commences in measure 3 where a D and A perfect 5th harmony is created, followed by a minor third f in the soprano at the end of measure 3. There is little to no melodic imitation, though there is homorhythm many areas throughout the piece. There is homorhythm in measures 9 through 11 between the soprano and the tenor and the alto and the bass. Other homorhythmic measures include measure 20, 21, 34, 37, 51, 55 and 61. Homophony occurs a few times in the piece in measure 1 with the soprano and bass, measures 5-6 in the alto and bass, and measures 41-44 in the soprano and alto.

There are no instruments required as all four voices are texted. The rhythm is cut time, or in duple mensuration. There is no syncopation anywhere in the piece, though there are some dotted rhythms, eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and whole notes. The rhythm is relatively straightforward, mostly comprised of quarter notes almost always starting on the first beat. The melodic style is mostly syllabic, interspersed with neumatic phrases and a few melismas. Generally, the beginning of each phrase starts syllabically and moments of neumaticism or melismas occur toward the middle or end of the phrase. For example, in the first phrase in the soprano, “Mia benigna fortuna e’l viver lieto,” the phrase starts off syllabically, but a small melisma occurs in the soprano on the syllable “tu” before cadencing on “na” in “fortuna.” Another melisma occurs in the bass towards the end of the piece in measure 79 on the syllable “le” in “Stile.” The few melismas that occur are all one measure in length and follow a similar rhythm.

Cadences match phrase structure of the text because there are often whole notes or at least dotted half notes that end phrases of the text, while the phrase is recited usually with eighth, quarter or half notes. The phrases generally begin harmonically and rhythmically simple and swell towards the height of their complexity in the middle before backing down a bit into an often unified and simple cadence. The phrases are also relatively the same in length.

Chromaticism is used somewhat frequently and most often leading into cadences. Most obvious is the last phrase of the piece, in which Rore cadences with a major chord through employing an F#. He also raises the leading tone (C#) in the soprano which indicates a coming final cadence. In addition, he descends chromatically in measure 84, going from Eb-D-C#, which further emotionally expresses the coming cadence. Rore also flats the fifth above D (A) and Eb throughout the piece, as well as C# whenever leading to D. The vocal range of this piece is not too big; the highest note is the d an octave above middle c in the soprano, and the lowest an F in the bass an octave below middle c.

The music appears relatively easy to sing. There are few large leaps, and almost all accidentals are achieved through stepwise motion. The rhythm is also straightforward and relatively consistent. The few melismas that occur are examples of word painting; for example, “tu” in “fortuna’s” melisma emphasizes “fortune” in the first phrase. The last melisma, on the last word “stile” emphasizes the conquering the character’s style by death. In addition, word painting occurs when the second part about death begins: not only is there a double bar line and fermata cadence preceding the Death section, but the b-flat is naturalized and the section begins in homophony. Further, there are no F#’s until the very end of the piece, creating a doom-like, sad and fatal quality to the music. There

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Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) is regarded as a revolutionary composer who marked the transition from the Renaissance style of music to that of the Baroque. He developed two distinctive styles of composition: the roots of Renaissance polyphony and the new basso continuo technique of the Baroque. Until the age of forty, Monteverdi worked primarily on madrigals, composing a total of nine books. As a whole, the first eight books of madrigals show the enormous development from Renaissance polyphonic music to the monodic style typical of Baroque music ⁴. The important preface of Monteverdi's eighth madrigal book seems to be connected with his *seconda prattica*. He claims to have invented a new "agitated" style ⁴.

Claudio Monteverdi's madrigal "Hor che 'l ciel e la terra" published 1638 in Monteverdi's 8th book of madrigals, *Madrigali Guerrieri et Amorososi* is about a soldier in wartime lamenting the distant and presently impossible salvation: his love. Thus, this madrigal is both a wartime and love madrigal, two topics Monteverdi most commonly wrote of. Like the other madrigals, the text is in sonnet form. Like Rore's, this madrigal is divided into two parts separating thoughts: the first describes action of the character (lying awake thinking of his distant beloved in contrast to sleeping nature) and the second explains how his beloved is responsible for both his sorrow and "light" as "One hand alone cures me and stabs me." The line lengths are for the most part equal. However,

⁴ Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune, *The New Monteverdi Companion*.

(London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1985).

three lines are longer than the others, the first in the first stanza describing the characters actions in verbs, the second wrapping up the first stanza, and the third “a thousand times daily I die, a thousand I am born,” the last full statement of the text. The texture is polyphonic, like almost all of Monteverdi’s madrigals. The piece is texted for a full-bodied six voices and 2 obbligato “violini.”

There is no melodic imitation because the voices are always moving together and at almost exactly the same time throughout the entire piece. Therefore, on the other hand, there is a ton of homorhythm. In fact, almost the entire piece is homorhythmic. There are some places in which voices momentarily drop out, but there are always at least three voices at once as well as the violins, so the whole madrigal is polyphonic except for a few places in the second part where there are only two voices at once for a maximum of two measures, creating momentary homophony. The piece becomes slightly less homorhythmic towards the end. However, the rhythm is imitated in a different voice directly afterwards in these cases as displayed on pg. 69 of the score.

The piece is in duple meter, with 4 beats in each measure (each beat a quarter note in length). There is a little syncopation, but like the madrigals preceding it, the rhythm is relatively straightforward. Syncopation most commonly occurs at the beginning of phrases where the music enters on beat two, accenting the weak beat. A rest generally separates phrases and it usually occurs on beat one. There are also some moments where a phrase begins on a pickup, the 4th beat of a given measure. Beyond that, the rhythm is very straightforward with repeated eighth notes in a row, repeated quarters, and little rapid variation within measures. The melodic style is, like preceding madrigals, mostly

syllabic. This madrigal, however is by far the most syllabic, without a single melisma in sight and only a few moments of neumaticism. These moments include stretched out half notes on pg. 45 in the top three voices on the word “piango” or “I weep.” This emphasizes the slow painfulness of the weeping sensation the character feels at the thought of his love.

Cadences match phrase structure of the text because they begin similarly with homorhythmic quarter notes and always cadence on whole notes. Rests also divide phrases apart, unlike previous madrigals. Phrases are generally constructed with a measure or two of straight quarter notes, then relaxed with half notes, usually followed by one-two quarter notes before cadencing on a whole note. The phrases, both textually and musically are roughly of equal length. Chromaticism is used lightly, but is most common when vacillating between G and G# as shown on pg. 40 of the score. There are also occasions of F#, Bb, and C# in various voices; they are always approached stepwise and usually occur twice in a row. The vocal ranges from a low D in the bass to a high A in the canto.

There is some word painting; in the first phrase, on the word “terra” (Earth), all the voices have low notes in homorhythm and are very grounded in a consonant a minor chord. Further, from pages 22-23, on the word “dolce” (sweet), Monteverdi uses chromaticism moving from Bb to B in an interesting rhythm. While, on the word “bitter,” he repeats the same note twice in a quarter note, showing contrast between sweet and bitter. There is no specific overall form because there is not a specific form for the text; there are no repeated lines, no rhyme schemes and no particular structure of line length.

Musically, this is reflected as the voices do not repeat themselves either and there is no structure beyond unified beginning and cadenced phrases.

Claudio Monteverdi, Cipriano De Rore and Philippe Verdelot all lived and composed in radically changing time frames. Yet, it is impossible not to see the layers of growth madrigals achieved through building upon predecessors' techniques. For example, we can see that word painting increased throughout generations as exemplified by comparing the three composers' works. Despite differences in polyphony and phrase structure, all three composers employed chromaticism, little dissonance, Petrarch's poetry, and an expressive and serious musical mood. The development of the sixteenth century madrigal can be remarkably visible through the analysis of Monteverdi, Rore, Verdelot and their respective works.

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