

UNSUSPECTED
ELOQUENCE

*A History of the Relations between
Poetry and Music*

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New Haven and London, Yale University Press

well as in form. As Alfred Einstein explains, this demand ultimately destroyed the rhythmic and harmonic characteristics of the *frottola*:

The madrigal style originated in a disintegration of the *frottola*, more exactly, a disintegration for the sake of expression. Into the *frottola* there intrude polyphonic or quasi-polyphonic passages which spread healing or even poisonous enzymes, penetrating and transforming the whole tissue, the entire structure, of the composition. It is above all the definite songlike and often even dancelike rhythm of the *frottola* which gives way to a rhythmic suppleness. The relative definiteness of tonality is destroyed. . . . Within the frame of the chosen key, whether major or minor, every harmonic liberty is permitted if it serves the ends of individual expression. Compared with the *frottola*, the harmonies of the madrigal begin to assume a fluctuating and labile character.

(vol. I, p. 119)

As we have seen, polyphonic equality of parts, "rhythmic suppleness," and advanced harmony were all characteristics of the Netherlandish composers working in Italy at this time. Considered as musical techniques, all three had traceable constructive origins; Josquin had begun to find ways to make them expressive—both for the dramatic Latin Psalm texts he favored in his motets and for the lighter French and (occasionally) Italian texts of his secular *chansons*. So it should not surprise us that two of the first three composers of madrigals, Verdelot and Arcadelt, were actually Northerners, while the third, Costanzo Festa, was a native Italian known for his skill at the "Netherlandish" kind of church music. In responding to the challenge of setting the rhetorically sophisticated poetry of Petrarch and his imitators, these composers significantly furthered the process begun by Josquin: the assigning of expressive values to previously constructive techniques.

Construction as Expression:

Four Analogues between Poetic and Musical Technique

In the madrigal, we may see composers responding to Petrarchan poetry by working out precise musical analogues for poetic techniques. Simplifying a much more complicated situation, we may

divide these techniques, poetic and musical, into four groups: (1) rhythmic, (2) melodic, (3) harmonic, (4) contrapuntal.

1. The most obvious analogues between poetic and musical technique lie in the area of rhythm. We have already seen some parts of the history of these relations, including the separation of poetic and musical rhythm in the late Middle Ages. In the madrigal, composers borrowed from poets the idea of using rhythm mimetically. Classical poets, most obviously Ovid and Virgil, had already made rhythmic technique expressive, writing fast, slow, choppy, or smooth lines not merely for formal variation but to enhance the meaning of their words; Petrarch and his Renaissance followers were enthusiastic imitators of these procedures, though the different metrical systems of their poetry required them to modify or adapt some classical techniques.

In a passage dealing with rapid motion, an accentual-syllabic poet may add extra syllables to a line to invite a faster reading; Petrarchan poetry frequently replaces iambs with anapests for that purpose. In a passage emphasizing slower motion, fatigue, or despair, the poet may employ consonant clusters to slow down the recitation. Thus the headlong rush of Petrarch's line describing a woman escaping from Cupid:

E de' lacci d'Amor leggiera e sciolta . . .

[Out of the snares of Love light and nimble . . .]

And the contrasting impeded motion of these lines describing a suffering lover:

Se la mia vita da l'aspro tormento
Si può tanto schermire e da gli affani . . .

[If my life can withstand the harsh torment and the breathlessness . . .]²⁰

In a passage where the poet wishes to emphasize a strong break in the syntax, he may employ a distinct medial *caesura*; again, examples abound in Petrarch. But the difference between the fastest line Petrarch can construct and the slowest is not quantitatively great, nor can the strongest medial *caesura* last very long; even in

20. Following the text of *Francesco Petrarca: Le Rime*, ed. Giosue Carducci and Severino Ferrari; Sonnet VI, line 3, p. 8; Sonnet XII, lines 1-2, p. 14.

the most extreme cases, these techniques can only *encourage* certain rhythmic features of a recitation. Musical notation, by contrast, can absolutely *control* rhythmic performance, and its range of variation is at once greater and more precise. Thus the musical versions of imitative rhythm—rapid runs of short notes for words dealing with running or flying, long-held notes for words describing stasis, oddly placed rests when the speaker of the poem breaks off his syntax in despair—are more obvious, more dramatic, and more exact than the corresponding poetic versions. Since their resources in this area were so much richer, madrigal composers were able to extend rhythmic imitation far beyond the simple effects possible in poetry, but they learned to pursue such imitative effects from the poetry they were asked to set.

2. There is a more distant analogue between poetic and musical technique in the area of pitch. Because of the apparent pitch-difference between front and back vowels (see p. 3 above), poetic manipulations of what is usually called “vowel color” may suggest musical manipulations of register. A line restricted to a narrow range of vowel sounds is likely, in Petrarch, to describe a calmer emotional state than a line with more extreme contrasts of vowel sounds. Thus the beginning of one of the sonnets playing on the resemblance of Laura’s name to *l’aura* (the air) and *lauro* (the olive tree) uses those two words to frame a line otherwise restricted to the vowel *e*:

L’aura celeste che ’n quel verde lauro . . .

[The heavenly air in that green laurel tree . . .]

But the beginning of the first sonnet after Laura’s death juxtaposes many different vowel sounds, appropriately suggesting the violence of the speaker’s response:

Oimè il bel viso, oimè il soave sguardo!

[Alas that lovely face, alas that sweet glance!]²¹

Again, musical resources are richer. Madrigal composers could use wide leaps of register to set texts about sudden changes; they could give a large expressive interval to one part or move the com-

21. Sonnet CXC VII, line 1, p. 283; Sonnet CCLXVII, line 1, p. 369.

posite texture down by dropping out the upper voices and scoring some despairing phrase for low male voices alone. In their general suggestive quality, these manipulations of pitch to achieve tone-color were somewhat analogous to a poet's choice of vowels, but the melodic imitative techniques which became virtually mandatory in madrigal writing were more obvious and literal-minded: high notes to set such words as "*ciel*" (heaven), low notes to set such words as "*sepulcro*" (grave), stepwise passages in the appropriate direction for words describing motion up or down.

Limited in his choices of vowels by considerations of meaning as well as of sound, a poet could usually only suggest a mood, and his contrasts of vowels, dependent on overtone pitches, were much more vague and illusory than the obvious contrasts of fundamental pitch in music. Nonetheless, John Milton, centuries later but still spiritually in the Renaissance, did achieve a melodic, scalar, imitative use of vowels: in the apocalyptic lines on Satan's fall in *Paradise Lost*, the sequence of vowels from *Ethereal* to *bottomless* suggests a jagged, precipitous fall:

Him the Almighty Power
Hurl'd headlong flaming from th'Ethereal Sky
With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition, . . . (I, 44-47)²²

But what for Milton was a virtuoso feat was, for a madrigal composer, as easy as writing a scale. As the term "word-painting" implies, composers could be quite precise in matching pitches to words, sometimes so precise as to bring expression back toward recondite construction: such punning practices as the use of the scale pitches *la*, *sol*, and *mi* to set the Italian words which happen to be their homophones were evidently designed to appeal to the singers of madrigals, not their hearers, as were the frequent examples of "eye music," in which black notes were employed to set texts referring to darkness or death.

3. But if composers had more precise means of expression in the areas of rhythm and pitch, poets had a similar advantage in describing emotional conflict. Not only did their words have understood meanings in a way that no note or chord could, but

22. This and all citations of Milton are from *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes.

they were able to use rhetorical figures, puns and oxymorons, to express ironies, paradoxes, antitheses. For these techniques, as for rhetoric generally, composers lacked an obvious melodic or rhythmic equivalent; even with unusual rhythms or dissonant intervals, it was difficult for a single vocal line to express ambiguity. But the increasing harmonic sophistication we have seen in Josquin held more promising possibilities. Many of the phrases William Kennedy uses to describe rhetorical technique as a structural device in the passage already quoted could easily be applied to Renaissance harmonic technique. The harmonic shape of many an Italian madrigal could also be described as a "strategy of alternating and suspending contrarities," and the power of harmonic organization to mark off portions of a piece as related to one another gave composers more subtle ways to shape their pieces than the simple matching of the evenly-measured and repetitive phrases of the *frottola*. The "expression of joy and lament, hope and despair" became positively identified in this period with the alternation of major and minor harmonies; "a dialectical unity evol[ing] out of multiplicity" is practically a Renaissance definition of harmony; and the greatly increased use of chromaticism in this period resulted from a search for "patterns of shading and contrast." The harmonic innovations of the Italian madrigal composers, some of them wild experimental failures, some of them successes so decisive as to affect the whole later history of tonal music, began as attempts to find musical equivalents for the persuasive power of Petrarchan rhetoric.

But chords are not words, and the meaning of a Petrarchan oxymoron ("freezing fire" or "living death"), however problematic, is more specific than the meaning of two juxtaposed contrasting chords. The association of major chords with cheerful sentiments, minor chords with sadness, and dissonances with tortuous or difficult matters was quite well established by the middle of the sixteenth century, but we ought to recognize that these associations, like the Greek teaching about *ethos*, were utterly arbitrary. Major and minor are different, and the exploitation of that difference was a crucial step in the development of tonality, but there was no reason for assigning major harmonies to joy and minor ones to sorrow on purely musical grounds. My own suspicion is that the mystical or symbolic association of certain kinds of texts

with certain church modes in the Middle Ages led slowly, as the modal system was modified by the advent of polyphony, to the simpler and more general associations that major and minor still carry for Western ears. Gioseffe Zarlino, the greatest theorist of the Renaissance, gives precise instructions for harmonic techniques of text-setting in his *Instituzioni armoniche* (1558), defining "sad harmony as one which combines slow movement with the use of syncopated dissonances and minor chords, whereas gay harmony prefers major chords in light and fast rhythms."²³ But he prefaces this discussion by quoting Horace and Ovid on the use of appropriate meters for tragedy and comedy, making it clear that his rules for composers proceed on the analogy of literary practice: "if the poet is not permitted to write a comedy in tragic verse, the musician will also not be permitted to combine unsuitably these two things, namely, harmony and words."²⁴ Earlier in the same treatise, in a general discussion of the uses of dissonance, Zarlino falls naturally into a series of Petrarchan phrases:

A dissonance causes the consonance which immediately follow it to seem more acceptable. Thus it is perceived and recognized with greater pleasure by the ear, just as after darkness light is more acceptable and delightful to the eye, and after the bitter the sweet is more luscious and palatable.²⁵

In this metaphorical way, harmony could achieve antithesis, both as a local phenomenon and as a structural one. But its two basic contrasts—major versus minor and consonance versus dissonance—obviously constituted a more limited vocabulary than that available to poets. The composers who sought most restlessly for new harmonic effects and distant tonal territories—Adrian Willaert, his pupil Cipriano de Rore, and (at the end of the century) the astounding Don Carlo Gesualdo—were seeking to develop a wider and more precise harmonic vocabulary. But unlike poets, who could expect their readers to know the dictionary

23. I quote the summary given by Lowinsky in his article, "Music in the Culture of the Renaissance," p. 537. The entire passage is translated in Strunk, pp. 256-57.

24. Chapter 32, following the translation given in Strunk, p. 256.

25. Chapter 27; in Strunk, p. 232. A forthcoming book by the Israeli musicologist Dom Harran, entitled *From Hebrews to Humanists: The Poetics of Music in the Renaissance*, will show that Zarlino's learning extended to Hebrew accents and the relations between words and tones in psalmody.

meanings of the words they then combined in oxymoronic patterns, composers, once they ventured beyond the understood, culturally conditioned meanings of major and minor, consonant and dissonant, could not communicate so precisely. Gustave Reese says of Gesualdo that his "approach to the text [was] too individual to give rise to an enduring school" (p. 432), and it was perhaps inevitable that Gesualdo's development of harmonic technique along expressive lines would end, as Einstein puts it, "in a blind alley" (vol. II, p. 715). My point is that Gesualdo arrived at his justly famous harmonic extravagance by extending earlier attempts to express oxymoron and other rhetorical devices in chordal terms. If his pieces do not communicate with the preci-

(vi)-a; O - v'è la vi - - ta,
 (vi) - - a; O - v'è la vi - - ta, O -
 (vi)-a; O - v'è la vi - ta, O - v'è la
 (vi)-a; O - v'è la vi - - ta, O - v'è la mor - -

O - v'è la mor - - te mi - a? - - O - v'è la
 v'è la mor- te mi - a? O- v'è la vi - - ta
 mor - - te mi - - a? O - v'è la vi-
 - te mi - - a? O - v'è la vi - ta,

sion of Petrarchan poetry, they remain one fascinating example of what can happen to music when it aspires to the condition of rhetoric. Stravinsky's fondness for Gesualdo, as we shall see, was a recognition of kinship.

4. But it is misleading to separate harmonic technique from contrapuntal technique, and in the manipulation of their overlapping and interlocking voices the Italian madrigal composers found other ways to imitate and extend rhetorical technique. Below is a passage from Willaert's setting of a Petrarch sonnet in which the speaker asks a group of ladies where his own beloved is, referring to her, in a characteristic oxymoron, as "my life, my death."²⁶

vi - ta, 0 - v'è la mor - te mi - - -

0 - v'è la mor - te mi - a? la mor - te mi - - -

-ta, 0 - v'è la mor - te mi - - - a? Per-

0 - v'è la mor - - te mi - - - a?

- - - a?

- - a? Per- (che)

che non è con voi,

Per - che

26. I follow the version given in Einstein, vol. III, pp. 63-64, changing the clefs and using tied notes rather than dots across bar-lines. The piece was printed in 1559.

Harmonically, Willaert has used the conventional language: "*vita*" is set with major triads, "*morte*" with minor ones. But the staggered declamation makes the oxymoron more subtle. The declamation of the word "*vita*," beginning with the lower voices, takes us from D major to G major to C major, a strong regular sequence of triads. But while the C in the bass on the weak fourth beat of the third bar of our excerpt does provide brief root support for the upper parts, it is also the beginning of the phrase leading to "*morte*." On the next beat, the bass motion to A alters the harmony to A minor; by the time the top part has reached the second syllable of "*vita*," the F on which it arrives is the third of a D-minor triad, and the bass has already reached the climactic word "*morte*." This overlapping technique, which continues throughout our excerpt and may be found in hundreds of similar passages, was a successful way for composers to express and surpass literary oxymoron. When Petrarch calls Laura "my life, my death," he urges us to hold those contradictory epithets in suspension, to consider how one woman could be both things. But he must use his words sequentially; literary technique may only suggest simultaneity. By assigning those same words to overlapping voices, Willaert achieves actual simultaneity: not only are there chords, with their sensuous power and their conventional significance, but one voice can be emphasizing "*vita*" while another has already begun to emphasize "*morte*." The compositional techniques of canon and free imitation, upon which these effects depend, had of course originated as means of construction; in searching for ways to dramatize Petrarch's oxymoronic rhetoric, the madrigal composers found a way to give these contrapuntal techniques expressive significance.

In a study I have already quoted, William Kennedy explains how the pervasive use of oxymoron in Petrarchan poetry implies a divided speaker, at once infatuated and aware of the foolishness of his infatuation. Richard Lanham, in his engaging discussion of rhetoric in the Renaissance, argues that all rhetorical writers seek to avoid a stable, central, serious identity. The basic conventions of contrapuntal text-setting in the Italian madrigal present just such a division of the speaker, in contrast to earlier conventions. In ancient and medieval monody, text and melody were fitted together in a one-to-one relation. In the polytextual motet, each

voice part had its own text, sometimes its own language, with the effect of a combination of or a contest between distinct speakers. In the *frottola*, whether sung in four parts or by one singer accompanied by instruments,²⁷ the top line of music, the only line under which the entire text was normally printed, played the role of the speaker. But in the madrigal, in which all parts have the same text, but sing it at different times on different pitches with different rhythms, no part has a special claim to represent the “real” setting of the text. What poetry had to suggest by oxymoron, irony, conflicts between form and content, and other forms of “multiple ordering,”²⁸ music could present by offering different simultaneous or overlapping settings of the same text. In the hands of the Italian madrigal composers, the techniques of polyphonic counterpoint developed in the centuries from Leonin to Josquin became ways to dramatize, with irony and wit, the multiple *personae* of the Petrarchan speaker.

Virtuoso Rhyming in Shakespeare

In poetry not written for music, there was a similar appropriation of constructive techniques for expressive and rhetorical uses; rhyme provides the clearest example. For the troubadours and trouvères, as I have argued, the invention and perfection of rhyme-schemes had been an end in itself, a musical and technical discipline whose main concerns were balance, order, and symmetry. In Renaissance lyric poetry, which continued to employ many forms and rhyme-schemes developed by the troubadours, there was a more conscious effort to use rhyme rhetorically, either to point up and strengthen the assertions made by the syntax or to “impose upon the logical pattern of expressed argument a kind of fixative counterpattern of alogical implication,” a function of rhyme identified by W. K. Wimsatt.²⁹ In the latter case, the “fixative counterpattern” implied by the rhyming words functioned as a kind of imaginary counterpoint, an expression of aspects of the

27. There is some debate on this question, as Rubsamen and Einstein make clear.

28. I borrow this phrase from Stephen Booth, *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets*, p. 1 and *passim*.

29. In his important essay, “One Relation to Rhyme to Reason,” in *The Verbal Icon*, p. 153.