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Little is known about the seventeenth-century musician and composer Alba Tressina, and even less is known about her musical career, since only four of her compositions survive. She was a Clarissan nun at the church of Santa Maria in Aracoeli in the city of Vicenza, 60 kilometers west of Venice, and through the years of her stay there she rose in the monastic hierarchy to become abbess of her house. She studied music and composition with Leone Leoni, who published four of her pieces in one of his numerous books of motets. This joint publishing effort is the reason why we can discuss Tressina and her musical abilities today, for the only extant works we have of hers are those that appeared in this book. It is also because of this book of motets that we know of Tressina's talent for musical rendition, which Leoni references in his dedication. Therein he mentions her "melodious voice" and the "graces of [her] noble compositions." He finishes the dedication with a reference to how, when she performs these works, she gives them spiritual life, making them "breathe celestial harmony."

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, sacred music was seen as a means of transcendence, and as a conduit through which one could come into contact with the divine. Music and harmony allowed performers, and sometimes listeners, to tune their spirits to God and nature, affording the opportunity for divine ecstasy. Since women were thought to be less rational and therefore more prone to ecstasy and supernatural intervention (whether from God or the Devil), it was not uncommon for women performing music to achieve union with God. Leoni was clearly familiar with this mystical culture, as he was placing Tressina's musical abilities within the category of the

celestial, intimating that, through her music, Tressina could foster a direct connection with the divine.

One of Tressina's works that was published in Leoni's book of motets was *Vulnerasti cor meum*, a piece for single voice and continuo. The song's text comes from the *Song of Songs*, which was an immensely popular book in the seventeenth century Catholic Church not only because the allegories are vague enough to apply to many different situations, but also because it focuses heavily on corporeality and the spiritual intimacy that could be gained from physical intimacy. By using suspensions, melismas, and corporeal imagery, Tressina crafts a rhetoric of corporeality and desire born out of mystic ideology and the divine love tradition of the seventeenth century Church from which it emerged.

To build upon the words of intimate pain and fervent desire, Tressina pays close attention to note length. Every time the word 'vulnerasti' appears, the 'ra' is held out almost exaggeratedly. The rhythm for the first line is typical: two short eighth notes on 'vul-ne-' followed by '-ra-' lasting a full three beats, followed once again by two more short eighth notes on '-sti cor.' Because the surrounding syllables fall on short notes, the 'ra' sticks out like a drawn-out cry of anguish.

Sequencing and repetition are also key to the dialectic of desire, as they serve to incite greater and greater degrees of emotion and fervor. The initial three repetitions of the first line begin at increasingly higher pitches, moving from D to E to A. Sequences occur in the continuo as well. One example from the second page begins with an F major triad which in the next measure moves up a step to G major, and then A minor. This heavily sequenced bass line helps to stir the emotions of the protagonist, for the next line

she sings is ‘Quam pulchrae sunt mammae tuae’ (How beautiful are your breasts). The singer, appropriating some of the intense emotion from the continuo’s sequencing, sings the first half of her line (‘Quam pulchrae sunt’) two times in succession, building up to the ornamented explosion on the word ‘mammae.’

Sing the beginning 13 measures

Eucharistic images, in which believers consume the divine body of Christ, taking his blood and body into their own bodies, went hand in hand with much more graphic imagery of divine/physical nourishment. Christ’s side wound was a major source of inspiration as a place to enter his body and draw food, blood and nourishment as well as redemption. Mary’s breasts carried similar connotations as life-giving corporeal attributes. Just as Mary’s breasts fed and nourished Christ’s body, so could she feed and nourish a believer. Marion imagery such as this struck a resonant chord with nuns at the time. Indeed, the nuns felt a strong connection with Mary in her grief over Jesus’ death and the subsequent disappearance of his corporeal shell.

Tressina does not make mention of Christ’s wound(s) in this piece; instead she focuses all of her corporeal imagery on the breast. However, she does not include images of or allegories for milk or nourishment, either; keeping with the fourth chapter of the *Song of Songs*, in this piece the breasts serve as a source of visual pleasure and nothing more, moving thematically from interior pain and anguish to an external celebration of beauty.

The musical setting of this line revels musically in this new affective space. This line falls in the middle of both the text and the piece itself, couched on both sides by expressions of pain and unfulfilled desire. This line, though, introduces a new triple meter

and thus a drastically new affect that contrasts with the rest of the piece. The sudden change to three beats per measure begins a dance-like motive that just as suddenly reverts back to four beats per measure, though not without a brief, joyful celebration that, in signifying a dance, further highlights the body and its physicality.

Sing measures 31-48

Tressina also uses melismas – many notes embellishing one syllable – to emphasize and highlight specific words and images. Melismas are uncommon in this piece, giving added weight to the ones that *are* there. With melismas, Tressina places the most musical emphasis and ornamentation on two physical attributes, the hair and the breasts. Indeed, the final and longest melisma seems to forget that it is even part of a larger work, moving off by itself and getting all wrapped up in its own subjective expression.

Other composers of the time, such as Alessandro Grandi and Claudio Monteverdi used these musical techniques to depict full-on ecstasy, as Professor Susan McClary has shown in her work. However, things are not so straightforward in Tressina's piece, which seems to depict pain, longing, and joyful exuberance without portraying a union with the divine. Indeed, the final melisma seems to be an attempt at ecstasy that falls short, perhaps because it is trying too hard. When the line 'vulnerasti cor meum' returns at the end, very little has changed from the beginning. The dance-like celebration of the middle section and the long ecstasy-seeking melisma near the end have given way to stabbing pain once again.

The last three and a half measures are the most pleading of all; while previously every iteration of 'vulnerasti' included a sustained note of three beats or less on the 'ra,'

this time the 'ra' is drawn out to four beats, as if wallowing in the pain. This last phrase also takes on short two-note sighing melismas right at the end, in effect sobbing openly over the unattainable. By this time any pleasure present at the beginning has slipped away after the failed attempt at ecstasy in the long melisma, and suffering and darkness remain.

Because the piece was written for a single voice and continuo (perhaps to be played by the singer herself), *Vulnerasti cor meum* was most probably intended for personal or small-group devotion in a domestic context, and not for the larger, more public venue of the church itself. This private performance context would have underscored the deeply intimate nature of both the text and Tressina's setting, providing a means for the humble believer to become one with the divine as well as allowing for the very real possibility of ecstasy. Such music was seen as a conduit through which the human soul could become one with God: a springboard of sorts to celestial harmony and divine union. By crafting her musical rhetoric to highlight and augment the swooning, bittersweet affect of intertwined anguish and desire, Tressina creates her own means towards salvation, ecstasy, and divine love.