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22

Gesualdo's Languishing Steps

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... if we knew the right way to set about it, we could do things far more strange and lovely. . . .

—Aldous Huxley to Humphry Osmond, 25 September 1955¹

Gesualdo's advocates have generally prized his harmonic unruliness, the very trait his detractors have scorned. What Sir John Hawkins lauded as "the sweetest modulation possible," Charles Burney pilloried as "forced, affected, and disgusting."² In the case of Aldous Huxley—like his friend Stravinsky, an enthusiastic admirer—fascination for the music came despite an aversion to the poetry. Huxley considered the verses of Gesualdo's madrigals "beyond translation and beneath contempt . . . there is no point in translating this sort of stuff, inasmuch as Gesualdo never set a poem, only the individual words and phrases."³ This is an insightful criticism, if incorrect. It is a view clearly shared in early recordings, at least one of which spliced together separate phrases with little regard for consistency of tone color or shape of the madrigal as a whole.

Modern criticism has benefitted as much from Glenn Watkins's research as from increasingly sophisticated and musical performances. Thanks in part to polished recordings like Anthony Rooley's rendering of Book 5,⁴ in part to more insightful musical analyses,⁵ and in part to a greater awareness of madrigals by contemporaries such as Luzzasco Luzzaschi and Pomponio Nenna, more informed views of Gesualdo have begun to emerge. And in the process, the luster of his style has lost some of its vaunted singularity.

But there is ample strangeness left to explore. My aim in this study is to describe two previously unacknowledged techniques that Gesualdo had for shaping his seemingly amorphous musical textures, and to show how he used these techniques to set his poetic texts—the whole texts, not just "individual words and phrases." In the first instance I will examine his shaping of melodic line in *Languisce al fin* (Book 5), in the second his construction of a harmonic plan in *"Io parto" ed non più dissi* (Book 6). By this I hope

¹ *The Letters of Aldous Huxley*, ed. Grover Smith (London: Chatto and Windus, 1969), 767.

² John Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, 5 vols. (London, 1776), 3:221; and Charles Burney, *A General History of Music*, 4 vols. (London, 1776-89), 3:221. Both are quoted in Glenn Watkins, *Gesualdo: The Man and His Music*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 371 and 373.

³ Letter to Robert Craft, 10 June 1958; *Letters of Aldous Huxley*, 849.

⁴ L'Oiseau-Lyre 410 128-104.

⁵ Gesualdo's debts to traditional modal practices are explored in Paolo Cecchi, "Cadenze e modalità nel 'Quinto libro di madrigali a cinque voci' di Carlo Gesualdo," *Rivista Italiana di musicologia* 23 (1988): 93-131.

also to demonstrate that related texts could spur similar musical responses. Were this a discussion of Schubert lieder, such a demonstration would be pointless because unity of text and music is so self-evident; however, it is precisely because it is so easy to fixate on individual phrases and mannered chromaticisms in Gesualdo that the isolation of a musically consistent response is of interest.

The texts of these madrigals share a common vocabulary and imagery, but they reach different conclusions. As in so many of Gesualdo's madrigals, the male lover speaks of death, pain, and—evidently one of Gesualdo's favorite emotions—languishing, which he often expressed musically by awkward descending leaps. But while the point of *Languisce al fin* is that the tormented lover, forced to leave, embraces death, the end in "*To parto*" e non più dissì is that the lover chooses to languish forever "in painful lays," returning from death to life. The opposition is diametrical: the first concludes "la vita lascio" and the second "i spirti spenti tornaro in vita."

* * * * *

Melodic Steps in Languisce al fin

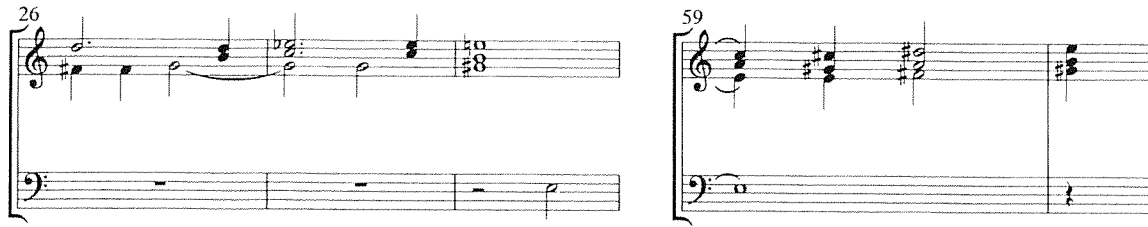
1. Languisce al fin chi da la vita parte	He languishes to the end who parts from life,
2. E di morte il dolore	And the pains of death
3. L'affligge sì che in crude pene more.	So afflict him that, in cruel torment, he dies.
4. Ahi, che quello son io,	Alas, such a one am I,
5. Dolcissimo cor mio,	My sweetest heart,
6. Che da voi parto e, per mia crudel sorte,	For from you I part, and, by my cruel fate,
7. La vita lascio e me ne vado a morte.	I leave life and go to death.

Languisce al fin impressed Edward Lowinsky as a madrigal "based on widespread elimination of the cadence as an organizing principle." In his view, merely beginning and ending on the same chord does not convey a sense of tonality. Watkins objected, rightly, that even if Gesualdo avoided authentic cadences there was no shortage of cadential activity.⁶ Moreover, in *Languisce al fin*—as I have noted elsewhere about *Dolcissime mia vita*—cadences are not the only way to emphasize a tonal (or modal) hierarchy.⁷ Gesualdo returns at significant moments to a single chord, in this case an E-major triad, the beginning and ending sonority. The first cadence is on E (meas. 8), as are two less conventional, but very prominent, points of articulation shown in ex. 22.1 (meas. 26-28 and 59-60).⁸ Essentially pairing these two points,

⁶ Edward E. Lowinsky, *Tonality and Atonality in Sixteenth-Century Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), 43; and Watkins, 190-91.

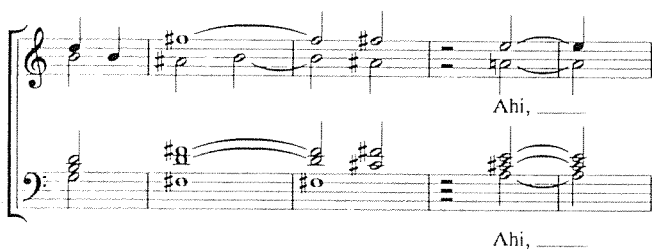
⁷ Reynolds, "Gesualdo's *Dolcissima mia vita*: A View of Musical Order," *American Choral Review* 26 (1984): 5-16. In this madrigal a D-major triad occurs prominently near the beginning of verses 1, 3, and 5.

⁸ The complete edition of Gesualdo's madrigals, *Gesualdo di Venosa: Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Wilhelm Weismann, 1-6 (Hamburg: Ugrinz, 1957-63), uses the irregular barring found in the Genoa edition of 1613. For this discussion I have rebarred for measures of uniform length, one breve (one whole note) to a measure.

Ex. 22.1. Gesualdo, *Languisce al fin*, meas. 26-28 and 59-60.

Gesualdo scored them both for the upper three voices and moved in slightly different ways to the same first-inversion E-major triad. These triads can be heard to mark the madrigal into thirds: the first comes twenty-eight measures from the beginning, the second thirty measures from the end, and there are thirty-one measures between them.

At the climactic mid-point Gesualdo turns to other harmonies. This moment occurs on “more” (he dies) at the end of the first stanza (meas. 38-42) with a subverted cadence that Gesualdo may have learned from Cipriano de Rore’s *Da le belle contrade* (ex. 22.2). As Rore had done, Gesualdo concludes the verse with a half cadence involving a suspension, Gesualdo on F#, Rore on A (shown transposed to F# in ex. 22.2b); there is a semibreve pause before the second half of the text begins with “Ahi, che quello son io”; and the new verse begins with a triad not on the expected chord a fifth below, but a whole step below that. Gesualdo brings the voices back not with a triad on B major but on A, as Rore had resumed not with D but C minor (shown transposed in ex. 22.2b). As did Gesualdo, Rore began the second half of his madrigal with the word “Ahi.” In both cases “Ahi” occurs in the forty-first and forty-second breves of the madrigal.

Ex. 22.2a. Gesualdo, *Languisce al fin*, meas. 38-42.Ex. 22.2b. Rore, *Da le belle contrade*, meas. 39-42, transposed down a minor third.

The harmonic logic is even stronger in *Languisce al fin* because Gesualdo had carefully prepared the way with two similar cadences that did resolve as expected: 1) in meas. 16-18, a suspension cadence on D leads to G major; and 2), in meas. 34-36, a suspension half cadence on C# is followed in the bass with an F#. For both of these cadences the bass movement is VI-V-I. The A-major triad that intrudes at meas. 41 does not so much replace B major as postpone it, for the climax of the second stanza comes at the double statement of "La vita lascio," both resolving to B-major triads (meas. 63 and 67).

But it is also worth pursuing Stravinsky's contention that "Gesualdo's music must be approached through the art of his voice-leading."⁹ Stravinsky's sensitivity to voice-leading is clearly evident in his own choral works; indeed, because of the comparatively narrow ranges of most human voices, choral part writing places special demands on voice-leading. Whether for soloists as in Gesualdo's madrigals or for choir as in Stravinsky's *Mass*, composers writing for several voices have long realized that by crossing two voices it is possible to create a third voice, a composite voice. When this practice occurs between the lower voices, the terms *basso seguente* or *bassus generalis* (in Monteverdi's *Missa In illo tempore*) have recognized the customary expectation that continuo players could fashion a bass line from the lowest sounding voices of a vocal score.¹⁰

The aural line created by the uppermost voices—called here a composite line—may or may not have musical significance. When it is simply the result of rapid overlapping imitative entries, the motive being imitated stands out forcefully. But in slow or non-imitative passages, the identity of the composite line may compete with that of the individual lines. One indication that composers were aware of composite lines can be detected in repeated phrases in which a motive heard once in a single upper voice is preceded or followed by the same motive as a composite voice. Stravinsky did just that in the Agnus of his *Mass* (ex. 22.3), when the final phrase of the second statement (a composite line of soprano and alto just before rehearsal number 61) immediately returns at rehearsal number 62 as the soprano entrance of the third statement. Much closer to Gesualdo, composite lines frequently appear in Monteverdi, as in *Volgea l'anima mia* (Book 4). At lines 8 and 9 (meas. 44-53) the motive twice sung by the top voice (canto) returns twice more as a composite line (alto and tenor, canto and quinto). As shown in ex. 22.4, there is a descending sequence: c''-b'-g'; g'-f#'-d'; d'-c'-a; and a'-g'-e'.¹¹

Far grander in scope than these examples, the composite lines in *Languisce al fin* extend for fully twenty-two breves at the beginning and end of the madrigal. The composite lines drawn from the canto, alto, and quinto parts are juxtaposed in ex. 22.5a (meas. 1-22) and ex. 22.5b (meas. 68-89); the underlined notes are from lower voices (a single line indicates the second line from the top, a double line the middle voice). The lines are by no means exactly alike; the resemblances are more of contour than of motivic identity. But when these measures are examined as composite lines, it is possible to "see" what is plain aurally: these outer segments are similar expressions of a single plan.

Gesualdo begins and ends the madrigal with a series of (mostly) descending motives that occupy progressively shorter interval spans. Although each of the top three voices contributes to the composite line, generally a single voice begins and ends the same descending motive. The composite lines start with one descending seventh leading immediately to another, and in both the second descending seventh is a

⁹ Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Expositions and Developments* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962), 120, quoted in Watkins, 379. The same opinion is expressed in Jerome Roche, *The Madrigal* (London: Hutchinson, 1972), 78-79: "Gesualdo was at heart a linear composer." Whether in speaking of Gesualdo or Palestrina, this view denies the interdependency of harmony and counterpoint.

¹⁰ This practice also existed in the fifteenth century. The Buxheim Organ Book (MunBS Cim.352b) includes a note in the manuscript to play the contratenor whenever it is the lowest part, otherwise play the tenor. See F. Mark Siebert, "Mass Sections in the *Buxheim Organ Book*: A Few Points," *Musical Quarterly* 50 (1964): 360.

¹¹ See also in Monteverdi's Book 6, *Ahi ch'ei non pur risponde*, meas. 28-29, where the upper voices resort to a composite line to avoid parallel octaves with the bass, and *O chiome d'or*, meas. 17, where a similar maneuver avoids parallel unisons.

Ex. 22.3. Stravinsky, *Mass*, Agnus Dei, composite line.

61

S mi se re re no bis

A

62

S A gnus De i qui tol lis

Ex. 22.4. Monteverdi, *Volgea l'anima mia*, composite line.

45

Ex. 22.5. Gesualdo, *Languisce al fin*, composite line of meas. 1-22 and meas. 68-89.

a. 7. 7. 6. 6.

b. 7. 7. 6.

a. 5. 5.

b. 5. 5.

a. = First 22 breves

b. = Last 22 breves

_____ = 2nd line from top

===== = 3rd line from top

whole step lower than the first. Next come descending sixths (two in the first segment) and ascending perfect fifths (two in the last segment), one of them the same fifth (*a'* to *e''*). In the final measures of *Languisce al fin*, the intervallic contraction continues to a diminished fifth for the words “e me ne vado a morte.” Both composite lines come to rest on *b'* after twenty-two breves. The music in these two segments accounts for forty-four of the eighty-nine measures; thus the symmetry of Gesualdo’s setting encompasses the first and fourth quarters of the madrigal.

Gesualdo’s ever decreasing intervallic patterns express musically the transition from life to death. In music, as in the poetry, a tormented soul departs from life, described first abstractly in the third person (“he . . . who parts”) then in the first (“I part . . . I leave life”). The final fall towards death begins in meas. 60 with an octave leap at “la vita lascio.” This phrase and the ascending octave repeat in meas. 65, and then, from the octave at “life,” begins the step-by-step contraction from descending seventh to the tritone at “death.” The decline progresses slowly, imperceptibly, by degree. It languishes to the end.

* * * * *

Harmonic Steps in “Io parto” e non più dissi

1. “Io parto” e non più dissi che il dolore	“I part” and he said no more, for grief
2. Privò di vita il core.	Deprived his heart of life.
3. Allor proruppe in pianto e dissi Clori	Then he burst out in tears, and Clori said,
4. Con interrotti omèi:	With interrupting gasps:
5. “Dunque a i dolori io resto. Ah, non fia mai	“Thus, with my pains I remain. Ah, may it never be
6. Ch’io non languisca in dolorosi lai.”	That I do not languish in painful lays.”
7. Morto fui, vivo son che i spirti spenti	Dead I was, now I am alive, for the spent spirits
8. Tornaro in vita a sì pietosi accenti.	Return to life at such pitious accents.

The lover in “*Io parto*” *e non più dissi* also languishes but finds this time the will to return from death to life. Again the madrigal begins and ends with E major, and again there is a symmetrical plan, but the markedly different resolution to the drama inspires an equally different musical conception. Rather than a two-part poetic structure, “*Io parto*” has three stages: 1) grief-stricken, the lover resolves to part (lines 1-4); 2) the resolve to “languish in painful lays” expressed in the internal quotation (lines 5-6); and 3) the return to life (lines 7-8). These stages can be summarized as departure (from life), stasis (reflection), and return (to life).

Gesualdo depicted these stages with a harmonic plan remarkable for its artifice. The final chord of each line of poetry ascends by step during lines 1 through 4; the concluding chords remain constant for lines 4 and 5; and they descend by step during lines 6 through 8. I have isolated these root-position triads in ex. 22.6; and table 22.1 lists the root tone of each chord, locates it by its measure number, and also by its position in each line of text.

After beginning on an E-major triad, lines 1, 2, and 3 end respectively on F#, G, and A chords; line 4 ends on successive triads built on B and C#; the ascent thus finishes after the first stage of departure concludes. Gesualdo marks the internal quotation, the stage of stasis, by reiterating the C# at the end of line 5, which

Ex. 22.6. Chordal plan of *“Io parto” e non più dissi.*

Verse no: 1B 1E 2E 3E 4E 5E

Verse no: 6M 6E 7E 8M 8E 8E

B = Beginning
M = Middle
E = End

Table 22.1. Harmonic plan of *“Io parto” e non più dissi.* The chords indicated in the column on the right occur for words underlined in the column on the left.

Verse	Chord (+ measure nos.)
1. <u>“Io parto”</u> //	E (1-2)
e non più dissi che il dolore //	F# (12)
2. Privò di vita il <u>core</u> .	G (18)
3. Allor proruppe in pianto // e dissi <u>Clori</u>	A (29)
4. Con <u>interrotti omèi</u> : //	b-C# (33-35)
5. “Dunque a i dolori io resto. // Ah, non fia <u>mai</u>	c# (42-43)
6. Ch’io non <u>languisca</u> //	B (45-46)
in dolorosi <u>lai</u> .”	Bb (51)
7. Morto fui, vivo son che i spirti <u>spenti</u> //	a (61-62)
8. Tornaro in <u>vita</u> //	G (63, 65)
a sì pietosi <u>accenti</u> , //	F# (68)
a sì pietosi <u>accenti</u> .	E (72-74)

elides with line 6. The stepwise descent from C# back to E begins with a full-stop pause in the middle of line 6 on a B-major triad, just as the poem refers to languishing. Lines 6 and 7 end on Bb and A; and line 8 has an internal pause on a G-major triad, another on F#, and the final cadence on E major. Only two of the triads come in the middle of a line, B and G, both in the second (descending) half of the madrigal; and, as with the F# triad that comes at the first iteration of the final word (meas. 68), these internal chords are both followed by simultaneous rests in all voices. The ascending and descending segments are symmetrical according to the placement of the C# triads that end lines 4 and 5: the first occurs thirty-four measures after the beginning, the second thirty-three measures before the end.

Perhaps the models for such a plan lie in the various hexachordal compositions of the time, but Gesualdo relegates the realization of any potential model to the background. The paucity of straight-forward cadences (that Lowinsky and others have noted) together with the frequent interjection of rests in all voices de-emphasize the importance of line endings and punctuation. Gesualdo marks the obvious points of grammatical closure with a very different harmonic scheme. The punctuated even-numbered lines relate in pairs of tritones: lines 2 and 4 conclude on G and C# triads, lines 6 and 8 on Bb and E triads.

The chromatic organization of "*Io parto*" does not necessarily follow from the stepwise ascending and descending pattern of the line-ending chords—that is to say, the tritone arrangement would not have occurred had Gesualdo been more regular in his ascent and descent. It results only because Gesualdo skipped over a concluding B triad during the ascent (linking it with C# at the end of line 4), and because he added a Bb triad in the descent, a chord absent altogether except for its appearance at the end of line 6.

The sense of circularity evident in the poem and the plan of line-ending chords is less pronounced for motives. Gesualdo's chromatic motive and texture at "*dolorosi lai*" (meas. 48-51) echo the earlier setting of the textually related "*a i dolori*" (meas. 36-38, 39-41). Similarly, the exceptional authentic cadence on G major at the words "*Privò di vita il core*" (meas. 16-18) presages the rhythmically square G-major triads at "*Tornaro in vita*" (meas. 63-65).

Chords accomplish in "*Io parto*" *e non più dissi* what motives do in *Languisce al fin*. Regardless of the pains Gesualdo took to obscure the stepwise progress of root-position triads up and down a sixth, or to disguise the stepwise contraction of motives, we can discern both plans because they are systematic, a term not often applied to Gesualdo. Moreover, the system that is evident in both cases arguably expresses what is common to the two texts as well as that which is unique to each: both poems describe languishing, but in the one it is languishing towards death (twice), while in the other the lover languishes at the pivotal moment in which movement towards death turns back towards life.

The techniques I have described in these madrigals were not, I believe, new to Gesualdo. But the use of non-cadential chords as agents of musical organization in the sixteenth century is virtually unexplored, as is the function of composite lines. If seventeenth-century works are understood as more tonal, it is at least in part because we accept a more chordal view of Seicento musical organization. But sixteenth-century composers—including Palestrina—had highly developed harmonic sensibilities, which have thus far been ignored in studies that dwell on mode and counterpoint. And regarding composite lines, works that avoid part-crossing may differ in terms of technique and textual expressivity from works that cross voices freely, but we are far from being able to say in what way.

Whatever their opinions of his style, partisans like Huxley and detractors like Burney agree in their estimation of Gesualdo as an innovator. But he was not the path-breaker they and others have made him out to be. Gesualdo only appears so because we have yet to retrace the compositional steps that made his strange loveliness possible.