

*F: Paper on Gesualdo by  
Ted Kalmon & Motet score*

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CARLO GESUALDO

By Ted Kalmon

## CARLO GESUALDO

### MADRIGALS

When we think of Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa, we think of emotional expression and chromaticism. Reese said, "Expression was his primary interest-- emotional expression, not concerned with eye-music or musical description of individual words. To this end, he made novel use of chromaticism." (Reese: 1959--p 431) Edward Lowinsky states a similar view, "Constant alternation between major and minor intervals, continued shifts of the harmonic center, and complete chromaticization of the scale (it takes Gesualdo no more than seven measures to present all twelve tones)--these are the chief means of attaining that tonal instability which Gesualdo needed to express the turmoil of his inner world." (Lowinsky: 1961--p 43) Chromaticism is certainly not the only technique that Gesualdo used--no composer's style is based entirely on the use of one parameter. What then were the other techniques used by Gesualdo? How were these techniques related to his famous use of chromaticism? In this paper, I will try to answer these questions by carefully describing his compositional technique in several of his madrigals.

Gesualdo's six books of five-part madrigals were all published while Gesualdo was still alive and they were published both in score form for study and in part books for performance. The madrigals I have chosen for analysis come from Book II (first published in 1594) and from Book VI (first published in 1611), and naturally any conclusion I will draw based



on these works can not be definitive, but can only be an hypothesis set forth to be agreed and disagreed with.

The most obvious technique used by Gesualdo is his contrast of textures. Chordal texture and contrapuntal-imitative texture were clearly delineated in Gesualdo's mind. All four of the pieces studied (see Appendix A for copies of the pieces) begin with a chordal statement of the opening phrase of the text, which is followed by a contrapuntal statement of the next phrase. In the madrigal "Non me toglia il ben mio" the two chordal phrases (meas. 1-4 and 14-17) are surrounded by contrapuntal phrases. Gesualdo's handling of the second phrase of text is an excellent example of his counterpoint (Meas. 4-14). The phrase begins with a solo statement in the second voice which is followed by either a duet or a solo statement of the same text and motive. As he approaches the cadence the text changes, the motive changes, and the texture becomes thicker until in measure 14 all five voices come together on a G-major chord. Similar phrases can be found in measures 27-36, and 36-42. In "Tupiangi, o Filli mia", notice the chordal opening (meas. 1-3) followed by a contrapuntal phrase similar to those described before (meas. 6-12). Here, however, the imitation is not exact, and the cadence is four voice instead of five. The last section of this piece (meas. 33-46) is a dense web of five voice contrapuntal movement with imitation and overlapping phrases. Here Gesualdo is more faithful to repeating rhythmic motives than he is to exact melodic imitation. The section ends with a Josquin like drive to the cadence characterized by a flurry of sixteenth notes. In "Moro, lasso," we find like before a chordal opening followed by a contrapuntal second phrase. Here, though, the difference is made even more obvious when we look at the note values used in the two phrases. In the first phrase, the values are dotted whole notes, whole notes and half notes. In contrast to the first phrase, the longest note value in the second phrase is a half note which

occurs only once in the midst of many quarter, eighth and sixteenth notes. Notice also the unusual cadence in measure 10, a 'C' stated by one voice preceded by a four voice G-chord. After this 'C' Gesualdo changes back to longer note values and chordal texture (the reason for this will be explained later).

Gesualdo's chromaticism might be presented best by first describing a phrase in which virtually no chromaticism appears. This phrase (meas. 1-5 in "Non mai, non mai non cangero") is obviously in B-flat major, in fact all the notes and chords can be accounted for in the key of B-flat. For other composers of the late Renaissance this would not be unusual but for Gesualdo, as we shall see, it is very unusual. In this phrase the bass functions harmonically as it sings the root of each chord except for the B-flat<sup>6</sup> chord in measure 4. The first chord of the phrase is identical to the last chord giving the phrase a static quality. There are no harmonic surprises or unusual cadences. The first phrase in "Moro, lasso", however, is similar to the phrase just discussed in only two ways: it is also chordal and it ends with a V-I like cadence. Both phrases are Gesualdo's. The chords of this new phrase (meas. 1-3) are: C# major, a minor, B major, G major, ? (notes a-b-c-d), G major, E<sup>7</sup>, and a minor. In the first four chords, Gesualdo uses eleven of the twelve notes, certainly a contrast to the B-flat major phrase. Other unusual aspects of this phrase are the harsh dissonance of a major second and a minor seventh in the fifth chord, a leap of a tritone in the second voice, and what amounts to a V<sup>7</sup>-I cadence in measure three.

Gesualdo's resolutions are often unexpected as in "Moro, lasso" measures 30 and 31. Here the phrase begins with an F major chord then moves through passing chords to B-flat major to an F<sup>7</sup> chord followed by a B-flat major 7 which resolves very unexpectedly to an E major chord. Gesualdo then repeats the phrase and transposes it up a fifth so that the tritone resolution is now from an F major 7 to a B major chord.



The last section of this piece contains more unexpected resolutions and also exemplifies another of Gesualdo's favorite techniques--the occurrence in the same phrase of major and minor chords built on the same root. Measure 34-36 is an example of such a phrase.. The first chord is an e minor chord which is followed immediately by an E major chord that leads through an a minor and a d minor chord to the final e minor. Both the d-to-e resolution and the e minor-E major contrast are typical of the tonal instability that one finds often in Gesualdo. The very next phrase (meas. 36-38) contains both an a minor and an A major chord and a g minor and a G major chord. Nor is "Moro, lasso" atypical, for in "Tu piangi, o Filli mia," one finds a g minor and a G major chord in measure 4 and again in measure 5. In the phrase beginning in measure 9 the alternation of F major chords with both b-flat minor and B-flat major chords is important. Further, in measures 25, 27, and 28 we find more major and minor chords--E and e, B-flat and b-flat, and B and b. Notice also the resolution chord in measure 27, a B major chord which is totally unexpected after a progression of F, E-flat, B-flat, and d chords, but that is Gesualdo.

In addition to major and minor chord contrasts Gesualdo is very fond of progressions of major chords. For instance, in "Non me toglia" the first phrase contains only major chords--no passing tones, no neighbor tones, no minor chords, just major chords (B-flat, F, C, F, B-flat, F). Later phrases in the piece contain minor chords and of course we find the major-minor contrast in measure 5 (G and g) and in measure 6 (d and D). An interesting correlation is that most of the phrases that use major-minor contrasts and/or unusual harmonic events are usually chordal rather than contrapuntal. It seems that when Gesualdo makes one parameter more complex he compensates by making another parameter less complex. When the harmonic progression is complex, the texture is straightforward chordal, and when the harmony is simple, the texture is a web of counterpoint.

To delineate the form of his madrigals, Gesualdo uses several devices: repetition of cadences, repetition of sections, and text repetitions. In two of the four madrigals studied, the opening section is repeated in both music and text; the music however is transposed when it is repeated. In "Moro, lasso," the opening as explained earlier is C-sharp, a B, G. This phrase and the entire section following it are repeated in measures 16-29, the repetition however is not exact. Measures 1-3 of the opening correspond to measures 16-18 of the second section, but in the second section the music is transposed up a fourth (F-sharp, d, E, C), the voicing is SSAT instead of SATB, and the duration of the second chord is half notes instead of whole notes. In the second phrase of each section the musical relationship is not an exact transposition of a fourth but is both a major second and a fourth. The important cadence in each section (meas. 10 and 24 respectively) are in C and F, a fourth relationship, but the tonality shattering note which follows each cadence is E-flat in measure 10 and D-flat in measure 24, a major second down. The final cadences in each section preserve this major second relationship and are on D and C respectively.

In "Tu piangi" Gesualdo again repeats the opening (measures 1-12 repeated in 13-24) and transposes it but here the transposition begins a fifth higher and finally cadences a fourth higher. Measures 1-5 and 13-17 are virtually identical rhythmically and textually, each voice however has been transposed up a perfect fifth. These phrases cadence in measures 5 and 17 on a familiar Gesualdo progression--minor to major chords--g to G in the first phrase and d to D in the second phrase. The contrapuntal section following these cadences is more elaborate in the second section than in the first for in the second section five part counterpoint is the predominant texture and two or four part counterpoint predominates in the first section.



The same techniques of repetition and transposition also occur at a more internal level in Gesualdo's madrigals, when he repeats at some transposition one phrase. An example can be found in "Non mai" measures 17-21. Here the chord structure and voicing of the first phrase (g, D, e, F) is transposed up a fifth for the second phrase (d, A, b, C). Also here, as in "Moro, lasso" the voicing is changed from SATB to SSAT when the transposition occurs. Yet another example of this same device can be found in "Moro, lasso" in measure 30-33 which were discussed earlier. Here we have phrase repetition, transposition, and voicing change.

The third device used for formal structure by Gesualdo is simple repetition of sections without transposition. This occurs most often with the last section of a madrigal. In both "Tu piangi" and "Moro, lasso", the final section is repeated, successfully completing the piece even though the final cadence is unrelated to the other sections of the piece. In "Moro, lasso" for instance the final cadence is on an A major chord and this is the only time in the piece that 'A' functions as a tonal center so Gesualdo wisely decided to repeat the final section.

To summarize: In addition to chromaticism Gesualdo uses major-minor contrasts and unexpected resolutions to continually surprise the ear. Formally, he repeats sections with and without transposition, and he repeats phrases immediately transposing them and changing the voicing. Finally, he delineates his sections clearly by alternating between chordal and contrapuntal texture.

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