Gesualdo's Late Madrigal Style: Renaissance or Baroque?

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Abstract

Carlo Gesualdo Prince of Venosa's sixth and final book of Italian madrigals has puzzled scholars since its resurgence in the early twentieth century. Written during a transition between the Renaissance and Baroque periods, Gesualdo's late madrigals present a musical style that seems to deny any attempt at precise classification with a stylistic movement. So where does Gesualdo's astonishing style fit within its historical context? And what about his music has drawn the attention of so many scholars? By analyzing representative madrigals of the Mannerist style, a stylistic movement of the Late Renaissance, and the emerging Baroque style, one can understand the general attributes of the musical context in which Gesualdo lived. After identifying the defining characteristics of Gesualdo's late madrigals, a comparison of Gesualdo's style and the styles of other madrigalists of his time reveals both the conventional and radical elements of his music. Through this method, one finds that Gesualdo's compositional style is derivative of the Mannerist movement but pushes the limits of this movement to new extremes, creating a style that would not be heard again for nearly three centuries.

Keywords

Gesualdo, Madrigal, Italian Madrigal, Renaissance, Baroque, Mannerism, Mannerist Style

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Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa is now known to be one of the most brilliant composers of the late Renaissance. His music underwent a resurgence in the twentieth century and was highly revered by modernist composers such as Igor Stravinsky. Gesualdo's music came to light as his shockingly advanced style was compared to the music of Richard Wagner and Arnold Schoenberg.[1] The sixth and final book of Gesualdo's five-voice madrigals has drawn the most attention from scholars, as it represents his most progressive and daring compositional style. What sets Gesualdo's late style apart from the other madrigal composers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries? By studying the historical context and stylistic movements of this period, it is apparent that Gesualdo's sixth book of madrigals pushed the limits of the Renaissance style to the extreme as the new Baroque style came into prominence.

Gesualdo's stylistic development can be traced throughout the events of his life. Around the year 1560, Carlo Gesualdo was born into one of the oldest and most prominent families in Naples, Italy. Carlo's father, Fabrizio Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa, had two sons, and as Carlo was the youngest, his brother Luigi was heir to the family title and estate. While growing up in his father's house, Carlo was immersed in a rich musical culture where he learned to compose and became an avid archlute player. He enjoyed a musician's paradise during the first part of his life, dedicating all of his time and energy to music.[2]

[1] Glenn Watkins, *The Gesualdo Hex: Music, Myth, and Memory* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 99.
[2] Cecil Gray and Philip Heseltine, *Carlo Gesualdo Prince of Venosa: Musician and Murderer* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1975), 7–8.

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Tragically, his unalloyed dedication to music was interrupted in 1585 when his elder brother died, leaving Carlo as heir with the duty to produce descendants in order to maintain the Gesualdo family line. The following year, he married Donna Maria d'Avalos, who bore their son, Don Emmanuele. On October 16, 1590, the marriage came to an unfortunate end, as Gesualdo performed the deed for which he would be long remembered.[3] Donna Maria had become entangled in a passionate affair with Fabrizio Carafa, Duke of Andria. When rumors of his wife's unfaithfulness came to his attention, Gesualdo entered by night into his wife's chamber and murdered and mutilated the lovers' bodies.[4] It is possible that this intensely emotional and traumatic event influenced Gesualdo's eccentric and highly expressive musical style.

Carlo Gesualdo remained at the Gesualdo estate for some time and assumed the title "Prince of Venosa" when his father passed away in 1591. After the death of his wife, Gesualdo resumed his obsession with music, entering one of the most creative periods of his life. In 1594, he married his second wife, Donna Eleonora d'Este, and moved to the city of Ferrara at the court of Duke Alfonso II d'Este where he interacted with well-known madrigalists like Luzzasco Luzzaschi. During the Duke's reign, Ferrara became the most important cultural city in Italy, but its splendor quickly waned after the death of Duke Alfonso II in 1597, and the artists of the city slowly dispersed, beginning the end of the Italian Renaissance.[5]

The Prince of Venosa soon returned to his home in Naples or at the family estate, where it is likely he spent the rest of his unhappy life.[6] Carlo Gesualdo devoted the rest of his years to his musical pursuits, producing some of his most beloved works, including his *Responsoria* for Holy Week and the fifth and sixth books of madrigals. Before Carlo's death on September 8, 1613, his heir, Don Emmanuele, passed away. As there were no heirs to the Gesualdo name, the estate was dispersed, and the dynasty came to an end.[7]

To this day, the life of Carlo Gesualdo has generated more interest among scholars than his music. However, through his years of scandal,

[3] Gray and Heseltine, *Carlo Gesualdo,* 10–12.
[4] Ibid., 13–32.
[5] Ibid., 43–48.
[6] Glenn Watkins, *Gesualdo: The Man and His Music* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 79–80.
[7] Ibid., 81–83.

murder, and torturous guilt, the Prince of Venosa managed to become one of the most accomplished composers of his time. Today, Gesualdo is primarily known for his Italian madrigals. He composed a total of six books of madrigals for five voices, and each chronological pair can be connected to a separate period of his life. The first two books were published in 1594 and are representative of his style before his stay in Ferrara.[8] Books Three and Four, published in 1595 and 1596, can be characterized by their Ferrarese influences.[9] The final and most notable books of Gesualdo's five voice madrigals were not published until 1611, fifteen years after the fourth book. On the dedication pages of both books, Pietro Cappuccio, Gesualdo's editor, provides an explanation for the delay between publications. He claims that the music contained in the fifth and sixth books was written as early as 1596 and had been kept solely for the Prince's own enjoyment. However, the publication became necessary after several of the pieces were falsely presented as the work of other composers.[10]

Although Cappuccio does offer a possible reason for the delayed publication of the last two books, Glenn Watkins makes several arguments that give reason to doubt the claim. Cappuccio's assertion that Gesualdo desired to keep the music to himself is dubious, for he printed two volumes of sacred motets in 1603. In addition, it is unlikely that Gesualdo composed all forty-four madrigals within a few months after the publication of his fourth book. Although the dates of the madrigals contained in these last two books are unknown, it can be assumed that they were probably written throughout the period from 1596 to 1611. Despite the disagreements about the dates of composition, it is quite plausible that the fraudulent reproduction of Gesualdo's madrigals was the primary catalyst for publication.[11]

Gesualdo's sixth book of madrigals was written during a time of transition between two major periods in musical development. During the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century, the Renaissance period was coming to an end, while the first elements of Baroque music began to appear in new compositions. However, many scholars have identified a smaller stylistic movement, known as Mannerism, which

[8] Alfred Einstein, *The Italian Madrigal*, trans. Alexander H. Krappe, Roger H. Sessions, and Oliver Strunk (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 695.
[9] Ibid., 698–706.
[10] Watkins, *Gesualdo*, 165–166.
[11] Ibid., 166–167.

existed within and between the Renaissance and Baroque periods.[12] By studying the styles of Mannerist composers like Luca Marenzio and Luzzasco Luzzaschi and the new Baroque style of Claudio Monteverdi, one can determine which characteristics of Gesualdo's style distinguish him from other composers of his time.

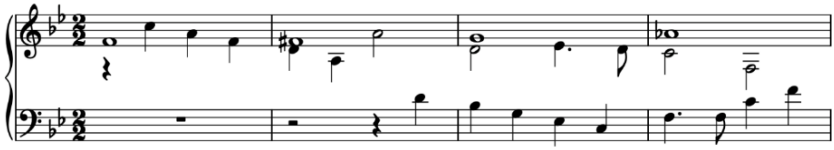
Beginning around the year 1530, a new style began to develop in Italy that later became known as Mannerism. This movement is not classified as a major stylistic period because it was altogether rather small. First, Mannerist influence was mostly confined to regions in northern Italy, so the style was far from being a universal trend.[13] Second, Mannerist music was almost exclusively reserved for the aristocratic court. When describing this elite style, Tim Carter writes that Mannerist art is "where form is more important than content, and where the appeal of the art-work lies primarily in the appreciation of how it effortlessly overcomes self-imposed technical difficulties."[14] In other words, Mannerist music pushes the limitations of performers, composers, and listeners to the extremes, making it an art entirely for the learned individual. Because Mannerism functioned by expanding the conventions set in place by the music of the Renaissance, it can be identified as a sort of subcategory of the Renaissance period.[15]

One of the most prominent and representative Mannerist composers was Luca Marenzio. The madrigal "Solo e pensoso" from Marenzio's Ninth Book of Madrigals[16] contains several idioms of the Mannerist style. The first twenty-four measures exemplify one of the most important characteristics of Mannerism, chromaticism. From the beginning the canto voice ascends from an F4 to a G5 by one semitone per measure and then descends by half-step down to C5. In addition to the melodic chromaticism in one voice, the harmonic movement freely shifts from one key area to the next using chromatic third relationships. Immediately at m. 1, the F major triad shifts directly into a D major triad in m. 2 (Example 1). There are other chromatic mediant relationships throughout the first twenty-four measures such as the movement from E-flat major

[12] Tim Carter, *Music in Late Renaissance and Early Baroque Italy* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1992), 15.
[13] Ibid., 18.
[14] Ibid., 15.
[15] Ibid., 18.
[16] Luca Marenzio, *The Complete Five Voice Madrigals: For Mixed Voices*, ed. John Steele, trans. Kathryn Bosi and Elisabeth Lee Giansiracusa (New York: Gaudia Music and Arts, 1996), 5:172–185.

to G major, C major to A major, D major to F minor, and G minor to B-flat minor. This liberal use of chromaticism obscures the tonality of the music, making it significantly more difficult for singers to read and for listeners to follow. Beyond this opening, however, "Solo e pensoso" remains rather diatonic.

Example 1: Marenzio, "Solo e pensoso," mm. 1–4.[17]



Luzzasco Luzzaschi was another madrigalist who was very involved in the Mannerist movement. Luzzaschi is of particular interest because he has a direct connection with Gesualdo. During his stay at the court of Duke Alfonso II d'Este in Ferrara, Gesualdo wrote madrigals alongside Luzzaschi, who was under the duke's patronage. Luzzaschi had a lasting impact on Gesualdo, as his third and fourth books of madrigals are highly influenced by Luzzaschi's style.[18]

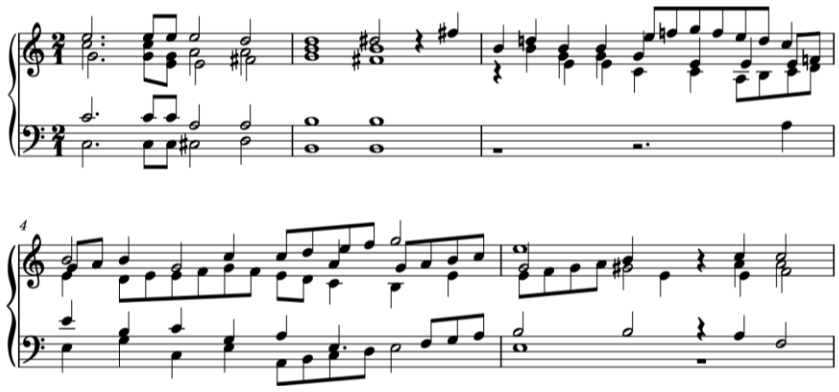
In his madrigals, Luzzaschi expands even further on the techniques used by Marenzio. "Itene, mie querele" from Luzzaschi's sixth book of madrigals[19] is representative of his Mannerist style. In this madrigal, Luzzaschi uses chromatic melodic lines and chromatic third harmonies, but executes the techniques at a much more rapid pace than Marenzio. Measures 20–23 represent an exaggerated use of chromatic movement in individual voices, as they ascend by half-step in quick succession.

One important detail about Luzzaschi's style pertains to his use of texture throughout the madrigal. It starts homophonically with chromatic movement but is quickly interrupted with a quick polyphonic and diatonic episode (Example 2). A short segment of chromatic homophony resumes and flows into a more diatonic polyphony. At m. 12, the chromatic homophony continues until the rising chromatic polyphony of m. 20. The piece ends in a homophonic texture with much slower and less extreme harmonic movement. As described, the contrast between

[17] Marenzio, *Complete Five Voice Madrigals*, 5:172–173.
[18] Einstein, *Italian Madrigal*, 698–703.
[19] Luzzasco Luzzaschi, *Complete Unaccompanied Madrigals*, ed. Anthony Newcomb (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2003), 1:92–94.

homophonic and polyphonic textures is very distinct, and much of the daring chromaticism is reserved for homophonic sections. Thus, exaggerated chromaticism and contrasts in texture are both very common components of the Mannerist style.

Example 2: Luzzaschi, "Itene, mie querele," mm. 1–5.[20]



As the High Renaissance came to a climactic conclusion in the Mannerist movement, some madrigalists began to develop a new Baroque style. The most notable composer who pioneered these new techniques was Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643). Monteverdi emerged out of the Mannerist style but began to develop his own style during the early seventeenth century, eventually bringing to prominence the Baroque style madrigal.

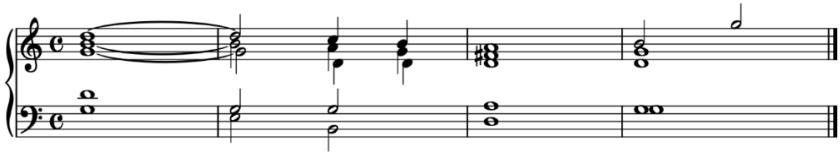
In Monteverdi's fourth and fifth books of madrigals, printed in 1603 and 1605 respectively,[21] one can see the progression from a Renaissance style into the beginnings of the Baroque style. The most prevalent element of the Baroque style that Monteverdi introduces is the clear harmonic progression and bass-driven tonality. The first madrigal in Monteverdi's fourth book of madrigals is "Ah, dolente partita!"[22] This madrigal represents Monteverdi's style before his deliberate experimentation with the new style. Although the madrigal generally remains in keys that are similar or related to the original A minor, it lacks a tonally functional bass to direct the harmonic progression. The bass

[20] Luzzaschi, *Complete Unaccompanied Madrigals*, 1:92.
[21] Claudio Monteverdi, *Madrigals: Books IV and V*, ed. Gian Francesco Malipiero, trans. Stanley Appelbaum (New York: Dover, 1986), vii.
[22] Ibid., 3–8.

part moves mostly by step during more sustained passages and participates freely in imitation with the other four voices, rendering all of the voices functionally equal. Therefore, "Ah, dolente partita!" is more akin to the music of the late Renaissance and contains very few, if any, distinctly Baroque characteristics.

"Cruda Amarilli, che col nome ancora" is one of Monteverdi's most famous madrigals. It appears at the very beginning of the fifth book,[23] and the Baroque style begins to come into focus. The bass part is much more disjointed than that of "Ah, dolente partita!" and acts more like a harmonic foundation. In the opening phrase, the voices function with typical tonal harmonic progression and voice leading, I–vi–I^6–V–I (Example 3). Although the madrigal varies from the overtly tonal homophony of the first phrase, the harmonic progression retains the predictability and theoretical logic of the tonal system. When compared with the first madrigal of the fourth book, "Cruda Amarilli" sounds much more stable and has clear direction. "Ah, dolente partita!" meanders through key areas freely and lacks the harmonic pull of Baroque tonality.

Example 3: Monteverdi, "Cruda Amarilli," mm. 1–4.[24]



In the last five madrigals of Monteverdi's fifth book, he introduces an independent part for basso continuo, a very distinct feature of Baroque music. "Amor, se giusto sei"[25] is an excellent example of the Baroque style coming into eminence. The five voices are accompanied by basso continuo throughout the piece and, with a few exceptions, the harmonic progressions adhere to the standard tonal system. In the polyphonic and homophonic textures, the bass voice simply doubles the notes of the basso continuo. Another important element of "Amor, se giusto sei" is the use of solo voices at the very beginning of the madrigal. It begins with the solo canto voice accompanied by basso continuo, but the bass voice takes over thirteen measures into the piece. The bass sings alone with accompaniment for nine measures, and the solo tenor continues

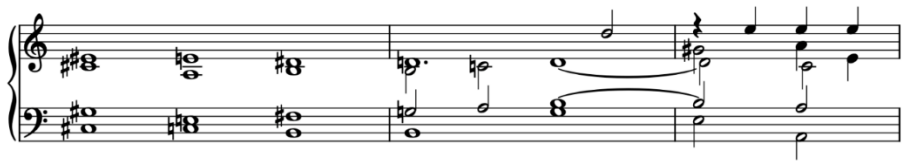
[23] Monteverdi, *Madrigals*, 107–110.
[24] Ibid., 107.
[25] Ibid., 187–195.

until the whole ensemble finally enters at m. 36. These extended solo passages foreshadow the rise of Baroque monody, or solo song with accompaniment.

Having identified some common characteristics of the two stylistic movements of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Italy, one can determine where Gesualdo's madrigals fit within this transition and how they can be distinguished from other madrigals of the time. In order to make this distinction, two of Gesualdo's madrigals from his sixth book will be analyzed and compared to the madrigals by Monteverdi, Luzzaschi, and Marenzio that have previously been addressed.

Carlo Gesualdo's fame is primarily derived from his use of extreme chromaticism. No. 17 from his sixth book of madrigals, "Moro, lasso, al mio duolo,"[26] has deservedly drawn much attention from scholars because it represents Gesualdo's most intensely chromatic style. "Moro, lasso" begins with four of the five voices drifting from chord to chord in slow homophony. It begins on a C-sharp major chord and slips down to A minor, a chromatic third relationship. The root motion is then repeated and transposed as the harmony moves from B major to G major. The G major chord moves chromatically to an E dominant chord, which finally settles on A minor (Example 4). In just this first phrase, three of the five chord changes are chromatic mediant relationships, and the only one that adheres to the functional harmony of the Baroque period is the movement from E dominant to A minor.

Example 4: Gesualdo, "Moro, lasso, al mio duolo," mm. 1–3.[27]



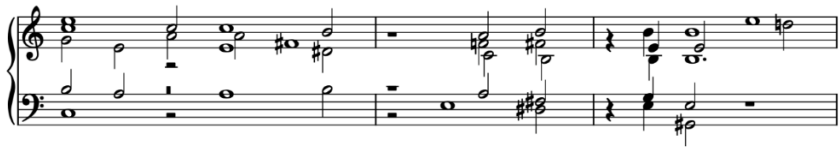
At m. 4 of "Moro, lasso," the voices explode into lively, imitative counterpoint, but unlike the opening, all voices remain strictly diatonic. The chromatic homophony returns at m. 10, and the first stanza finishes on a D major chord at m. 15. Gesualdo then repeats the stanza but

[26] Carlo Gesualdo, *Madrigali a cinque voci: Libro sesto*, ed. Hans-Jörg Rechtsteiner (Offenbach am Main: Hans-Jörg Rechtsteiner, 2014), 83–86. https://imslp.org/wiki/Madrigals,_Libro_6_(Gesualdo,_Carlo).
[27] Ibid., 83.

transposes the opening a perfect fourth higher, beginning on F-sharp major. The repetition of the first stanza proceeds in a similar manner as the first iteration, and the second stanza begins in the second half of m. 34. After a short, homophonic passage that is rather diatonic, Gesualdo finishes his madrigal in a slow, contrapuntal texture with relatively mild chromaticism. Despite the more conservative nature of the second stanza, there remain key features to address. Although the minor chromaticism in the final polyphonic section of "Moro, lasso" does not contain the bold harmonic shifts of the madrigal's opening, the counterpoint does create, at certain points, some sonorities that are rather foreign to the harmonic language of both the Mannerist and Baroque movements. For example, there are two instances of an E augmented triad in mm. 37 and 41.

"Mille volte il dì moro," No. 7 in Gesualdo's sixth book of madrigals,[28] demonstrates one more characteristic of the Prince of Venosa's compositional style. Because this madrigal is mostly polyphonic, it does not contain the drastic harmonic shifts of "Moro, lasso, al mio duolo." However, the counterpoint does lend itself to an extensive use of prepared and unprepared dissonances. Gesualdo's music contains a plethora of suspensions and chord extensions, but there are also several instances in which the lowest voice will sustain a note as the other voices enter above on a dissonant triad. This technique first appears in m. 5 of "Mille volte il dì moro." After a short pause between the first two phrases, the basso voice enters on an E. As the basso sustains the E, the other four voices enter on an F major triad and all resolve to a B major triad (Example 5).

Example 5: Gesualdo, "Mille volte il dì moro," mm. 4–6.[29]



Extreme chromaticism, textural contrast, and the liberal use of dissonance are all very important features of Gesualdo's style. So, where does he fit within the stylistic context in which he lived? In observing the contrasts between his chromatic homophonic passages and his

[28] Gesualdo, *Madrigali a cinque voci*, 31–35.
[29] Ibid., 31.

diatonic contrapuntal sections, it is clear that Gesualdo is drawing from Luzzaschi's tendency to write similar contrasts in texture. Gesualdo also occasionally mixes chromaticism into his slower polyphonic passages, but this technique is also displayed in Luzzaschi's madrigal, "Itene, mie querele," in mm. 20–23.

Gesualdo's chromaticism is also akin to the Mannerist style. Marenzio and Luzzaschi made frequent use of the chromatic third progression and freely shifted from one key area to the next. Monteverdi's madrigals remained primarily diatonic and were largely governed harmonically by the emerging tonal system. Displaying a harmonic language that is saturated with chromatic third relationships and tonal ambiguity, Gesualdo's style surely originates from the Mannerist movement. This is not altogether surprising, as Gesualdo spent several years in Ferrara, where Luzzaschi himself called home. Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that Gesualdo's style can be classified as Mannerism.

Despite the apparent resemblance of Gesualdo's madrigals to the music of the Mannerist movement, scholars have still singled out Gesualdo from among the other composers of the Late Renaissance. This distinction can be attributed to the fact that Gesualdo pushed Mannerist idioms to their limits. In Marenzio's madrigal "Solo e pensoso," each chromatic harmonic movement is followed by at least one tonal progression. For example, the E-flat major chord that moves to G major in measures six and seven is followed by a dominant to tonic progression to C major before shifting chromatically to A major. Even Luzzaschi's most chromatic passages in "Itene, mie querele" adhere to the same rule. Gesualdo's harmonic progression in the opening of "Moro, lasso, al mio duolo," however, moves through three chromatic third progressions and five total chords before finally establishing a tonal center in the third measure when an E dominant chord cadences to A minor. The lack of clear tonality for extended passages was a technique that very few, if not Gesualdo only, dared to employ. Gesualdo also expanded the treatment of dissonant harmonies, as displayed in "Mille volte il dì moro," by increasing the frequency of traditional dissonances, like suspensions and extended triads, and by introducing new techniques as described above.

The late madrigals of Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa continue to puzzle scholars to this day. The extreme chromaticism that represents his style renders his music difficult to sing and to listen to, making his music accessible exclusively to the learned individual. In contrast to Claudio Monteverdi's new Baroque style, with its strong sense of tonality and

bass-driven harmony, Gesualdo's virtuosic style belongs to the Mannerist movement that began more than seventy years before Gesualdo wrote his last book of madrigals. The evidence reveals that Gesualdo's sixth book of madrigals represents the grand culmination of the Renaissance period.

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