

## *Gesualdo: Misguided or Inspired?*

*Faye-Ellen Silverman*

Gesualdo remains to this day one of the most controversial composers in the history of music. Critics have accused him of poor writing, excessive and disorderly chromaticism, and the indiscriminate use of chords,<sup>1</sup> and they have pointed knowingly to the fact that he had no followers.<sup>2</sup> Adherents, on the other hand, have admired his craft<sup>3</sup> and pointed to his spiritual affinity with 20th-century atonality.<sup>4</sup> The obvious question arises: Which side is right?

An analysis of Gesualdo's works reveals that both of these extreme positions tend to ignore the essence of his music. His work is contemporary in sound due to its highly chromatic, nervously fluctuating, and extremely fragmented melodic lines, and its short contrasting sections. Yet it could not have been written at any other moment in history, for it is firmly rooted in the traditions of its own century. The counterpoint, with its careful treatment of dissonance, and the use of thirds and fifths in local as well as longer-range motions (yet without implications of harmonic movement), the employment of a modal center rather than a free use of the twelve-tone scale, and the constantly shifting rhythms and textures are the best examples of these roots.

The genius of Gesualdo, then, comes from his ability to integrate all of these elements into a unique system, one which enables him to use freely cross relations and fragmented lines while retaining the underlying coherence and unity which are essential to good art. His system seems to arise from a preference for a three-note chromatic motif, such as CC#D (sometimes re-ordered CDC#, DC#C#, etc.), used especially to express musically such emotionally charged words as "morire" or "torcete." This motif is occasionally extended to four, five, or even six notes. These notes may be stated in direct succession or may be separated by intervening notes. In the former case the motif is sometimes obscured by rests or by octave transference within a voice. In addition, there is occasional transference between voices, especially (a) in instances of intervening rests (Ex. 1)<sup>5</sup>;

### EXAMPLE 1

Luci Serene e Chiare (Sopranos I & II), mm. 19 - 20

The image shows a musical score for two sopranos, Soprano I and Soprano II, in a 2/4 time signature. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The lyrics are: "Non do-lor nel-la pia - ga, ma". The score illustrates a chromatic motif (C-C#-D) in both voices. In the first measure, Soprano I has a half note C4, and Soprano II has a half note C4. In the second measure, Soprano I has a half note C#4, and Soprano II has a half note C#4. In the third measure, Soprano I has a half note D4, and Soprano II has a half note D4. An arrow points from the word "ma" in the lyrics to the D4 note in Soprano I's line.

(b) in homophonic passages; (c) where the chromatic motif is transferred locally but stated in the original line by long-term references (Ex. 2);

EXAMPLE 2

Ardita Zanzareta (Soprano II and Alto), mm. 45 - 49

Pro-van-do in quel bel sen dol-ce ve-le-no, dol-ce ve-le-no

Pro-van-do in quel bel sen dol - ce ve le (no)

or (d) where a complete statement of the motion in one voice is not necessary since that voice or a neighboring one has stated the same progression a few measures earlier. In cases where the motif is interrupted by intervening notes, a single voice part is divided into two vocal levels, one of which states the chromatic motif (Ex. 3).

EXAMPLE 3

Dolcissima Mia Vita (Soprano I), mm. 8 - 11

La bra-ma-ta a-i-ta, a-i-ta? Cre-de-te for-se

Analysis:

(Note the perfect symmetry between the ascending and descending levels.) The chromatic motif often leads to the juxtaposition of major and minor chords.

Other chromaticisms arise from Gesualdo's preference for the chromatic neighbor note rather than its diatonic counterpart. Gesualdo treats the neighbor note in a manner similar to his way of handling the three-note chromatic line. He postpones the return to the original note, through rests, until the start of the next phrase; he intersperses notes at a separate vocal level; and he sometimes transfers resolutions to another voice, especially when such a transference would sound like a continuation of the original line. Thus, this neighboring motion is really a variant on the three-note chromatic motif.

When Gesualdo's juxtaposition of chromatic triads does not arise from such motivic considerations, it is generated by the harmonic movement of a third or a fifth. A harmonic analysis of Gesualdo's music (which does not use functional harmony of the Classic-Romantic tradition but does foreshadow certain harmonic tendencies of the Baroque)<sup>6</sup> shows that most chords, both chromatic and diatonic, move by thirds and fifths (Ex. 4).

EXAMPLE 4

Moro, lasso, al mio duolo, mm.1 - 4

The musical score consists of five staves. The top staff is a vocal line with lyrics: "E chi mi può dar vi ----". The second staff is another vocal line with lyrics: "Mo - ro, las - so, al mio duo - lo E chi mi può dar". The third and fourth staves are instrumental parts with lyrics: "Mo - ro, las - so, al mio duo - - - - lo". The fifth staff is a bass line with lyrics: "Mo - ro, las - so, al mio duo - - - - lo". Below the staves, a chord progression diagram shows the sequence of chords: C# (third), A (third), B (third), G (third), E (fifth), A (fifth), C (fifth), G (fifth). Brackets indicate the intervals between these chords.

The movement by thirds is sometimes an extension of the basic tonal area, for example, GBD-EGB, and sometimes an independent gesture, e.g., GBD-E $\flat$ GB. Occasional stepwise motions are used to create symmetry: when F-A is balanced by B-G, the A-B progression is stated. Local motions are supported by long-range ones. The intervals from the beginnings to the ends of phrases are usually statements of a third or fifth or movements of a second which are then followed by a third or fifth at the starts of subsequent phrases. Homophonic sections, however, sometimes move by seconds for contrast. The long-range motions of *Io pur respiro*<sup>7</sup> are (Ex. 5):

EXAMPLE 5

PHRASE	INTERVALS	TEXTURE USED
(1) mm. 1-12:	E → E	polyphonic
(2) end m. 12-16:	(E)A → D	polyphonic with increased rhythmic motion
(3) mm. 17-18:	D → C #	homophonic
(4) m. 19-beg. m. 22:	A → E	polyphonic
(5) mm. 22-23:	A → G	homophonic
(6) mm. 24-27:	G → F #	polyphonic with three chordal changes per measure and many repeated notes
(7) mm. 28-33:	B → D	polyphonic but only two chordal changes per measure.

PHRASE	INTERVALS	TEXTURE USED
(8) end m. 33-beg. m. 43:	C → G	polyphonic; fast to slower motion balances acceleration at end of phrase 7
(9) mm. 43-45:	C → D	homophonic
(10) end m. 45-54:	D → E	returns to same tonal area as opening.

(Note the textural contrasts outlined in the chart above. These will be discussed later in this essay.) There is no modulation, although an occasional progression which we would nowadays label  $V_7$  of  $V$  resolving to  $V$  is sometimes used, as well as the transposition of motivic material. Yet no new tonal area is ever established.

Such a systematized use of chromaticism may have been overlooked by other theorists who have had a bias toward tonal motion and/or have tended to regard each verticality as a chord. Gesualdo's music, however, stems from a pretonal, highly contrapuntal tradition and uses many notes purely as voice-leading dissonances. He employs, for example, incomplete as well as complete neighbor notes, anticipations, chromatic and diatonic passing tones, and suspensions and suspended passing tones, and will sometimes add a sharp or flat in order to smooth out a line by avoiding intervals such as the augmented second. An analyst, therefore, must look at metric stresses and think in terms of chordal areas which encompass more than one verticality.

George Ruffin Marshall is one of the many theorists who have dealt with Gesualdo's works.<sup>8</sup> I disagree with his conclusions, however, because I feel, for the reasons described below, that his focus is too narrow. He limits himself to the Hindemith system of analysis (whereby the lowest note of the strongest harmonic interval, in any combination, is taken as the root of the chord). In so doing, he treats the music as tonal, classifying chords by tonal functions, e.g., "the various types of  $\frac{6}{4}$  chords used,"<sup>9</sup> rather than examining the unique system of a pretonal composer.

Moreover, since Gesualdo's chords are related by a preference for harmonic thirds and fifths, it is also hard to agree with Daniel Rowland,<sup>10</sup> who says that unrelated chords from the chromatic gender [genus] are juxtaposed. While the chords may or may not be from the chromatic genus (I tend to think, however, that they are not but are built up anew by thirds), they are logically chosen in order to achieve an expressive effect rather than being merely juxtaposed.

For similar reasons Alfred Einstein's conclusion<sup>11</sup> that all chords are tested and all transpositions are permitted seems to overlook Gesualdo's system. New chordal combinations were certainly tried. But Gesualdo's purpose was not to test every chord (in contrast with some modern compositions which are written to "test" or demonstrate new instrumental effects). He chose his chords most carefully.

The position of some of Gesualdo's admirers is equally naive. For, in spite of the modernness of sound, Gesualdo is not, as Lowinsky believes, an

atonal composer (see Note 4, below). He lived in a period of musical transition, an era similar to the Ars Nova and to the 20th century. He was a composer who, writing at a time when the current style had reached its limits, had to create his own system.

This transitional position in history led him to find solutions to the problems of creating contrast, a process which parallels the experiments of our own transitional era. Gesualdo's music "works," therefore, for many of the same reasons that 20th-century compositions "work." Timbral and rhythmic contrasts (see Example 5, above) rather than harmonic motion propel his pieces and prevent stagnation. Each composition creates its own form. Gesualdo alternates polyphonic and homophonic sections, brings forth rhythmic differentiations between polyphonic sections, varies the rhythm of repeated words, constantly changes metric stresses and the ordering of the entering polyphonic voices, and uses contrasting motives. In addition, he employs other original solutions, such as the use of distinct phrases which move locally away from the modal center and have differing rates of chord changes, and his use of expressive dissonances, which create cross-relation tension and also contribute to the vital, nonstagnant quality of his music.

This transitional position also seems to explain the fact that Gesualdo had no followers. Scientists had just proven that the earth was no longer the center of the universe. This discovery had upset current philosophical and theological beliefs. Man, therefore, had to reestablish his sense of unity and sense of self. The development of tonality, which actually had its roots in the 16th century, seemed to answer this need for a unified system. Gesualdo, then, could have no successors, since, in order for such composers to carry further the implications of his music, they would have had to break with the traditional intervals of the third and the fifth, use tones independently, and fragment melodic lines completely. This step was taken at the beginning of the 20th century, where fragmentation occurred in everyday life and where, consequently, dissonance in music seemed expressive of the times.

Nevertheless, the very uniqueness of Gesualdo's music has led to its being admired and accepted hundreds of years after it was written. This acceptance may be linked to a change in aesthetics which has led to the use of a musical language which finds dissonance expressive and melodic fragmentation comprehensible. Tonal music was motion-oriented; music "worked" if it flowed from beginning to end, propelled by the resolution of chordal tensions. In the 20th century, however, there is a tendency to evaluate each piece in terms of self-consistency, rather than according to a set of predetermined rules. Each piece sets up and, when successful, adheres to its own rules. Gesualdo's music fulfills this criterion; with its unique but consistent use of chromaticism and its careful craftsmanship, it should continue to enjoy the appreciation it deserves.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Charles Burney, *A General History of Music*, ed. Frank Mercer (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1935), p. 181; Donald J. Grout, *A History of Western Music*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1973), pp. 292, 303; and Daniel B. Rowland, *Mannerism—Style and Mood: An Anatomy of Four Works in Three Art Forms* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1964), sec. 4, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Einstein, *The Italian Madrigal*, vol. 2, trans. Alexander H. Krappe, Roger H. Sessions, and Oliver Strunk (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1949), p. 215.

<sup>3</sup> Stravinsky's admiration of Gesualdo may be seen in the former's composition *Monumentum pro Gesualdo di Venosa* and in his discussion of this homage in *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky* by the late composer and Robert Craft (Garden City, L.I.: Doubleday & Company, 1959), pp. 33–34.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Edward E. Lowinsky, *Tonality and Atonality in Sixteenth-Century Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> All musical examples and measure numbers are taken from Gesualdo's *Sämtliche Madrigale für fünf Stimmen*, comp. Wilhelm Weisman (Hamburg: Ugrino Verlag, 1962).

<sup>6</sup> In Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History: The Renaissance* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965), p. 40, there is a passage from Zarlino which says: "The third [condition of what is sought in every composition] is that the procedure of the parts should be good, that is, that the modulations should proceed by true and legitimate intervals arising from the sonorous numbers [e.g., the unison, octave, twelfth, fifteenth, seventeenth, and nineteenth], so that through them may be acquired the usage of good harmonies." This shows that movements by thirds and fifths, which later became systematized in the Baroque, were very much accepted by 1558, the year of Zarlino's *Istituzioni armoniche*.

<sup>7</sup> This madrigal may also be found in Archibald T. Davison and Willi Apel, *Historical Anthology of Music*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), no. 161 pp. 182–83.

<sup>8</sup> "The Harmonic Laws in the Madrigals of C. Gesualdo," (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1955; Ann Arbor, Mich: University Microfilms Order No. 16–774).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48–51.

<sup>10</sup> See his *Mannerism—Style and Mood*, pp. 17, 27, 36, 37.

<sup>11</sup> Einstein, *The Italian Madrigal*, vol. 2, p. 717.