



«Observe, read, weep!»

«Inspice, lege, defle!»: these are the first words that were inscribed on Caterina Martinelli's tomb. She was a talented soprano, born in Rome in 1589 and died only 18 years later. The 'Romanina', as she was called in Mantua, was an important personality for Monteverdi and also for his employer Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga; she was his favourite. In 1608, at the Gonzaga court, Claudio Monteverdi and other musicians were busy preparing a performance of the opera *Arianna*, whose main role was to be played by Caterina, the court's youngest and most promising singer. However, just as the character of Arianna was coming to life, life left young Caterina, who died of smallpox on March 8, 1608, only two months before the performance, leaving the entire court and the city in sorrow. The complete score of the opera was unfortunately lost; the only piece to survive was the famous *Lamento d'Arianna*, the tragedy's central aria. This is no coincidence, as the piece became so famous that, according to the Florentine Severo Bovini, «there was no house which, having harpsichords or theorboes in the house, did not have the lament of that one». Arianna's voice thus became that of the actress Virginia Andreini, but for Monteverdi and many others, Arianna's *thread* remained Caterina.

A singer from the papal chapel, Paolo Faconi, who in addition to singing as a bass, was in the service of the Gonzaga family as a musician recruiter for their court in Mantua, discovered Caterina's talent when the girl was just thirteen years old. Caterina's name appeared for the first time in a letter in which Faconi warned Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga that he was «awaiting commandment of what he has to do about the young lady who sings, who [goes] keeping in hope and faith of having to come to Mantua». From some letters between Caterina's father, Donato Antonio Martinelli, and Duke Vincenzo, it can be deduced that her father had initially intended to send his daughter to Florence to study with Giulio Caccini, the most famous singer and maestro of the time, and only afterwards bring her to Mantua to become a court singer. However, Caccini insisted that he «would not want to teach that young Romana unless Your Highness put her in his house», which was certainly not to the duke's liking, even though Caccini had given «to understand that she would be safe». Perhaps, had Caterina been allowed to study with Caccini, the words of *Amarilli, mia bella* would have been dedicated to her; but we will never know this: «Non credi, o del mio cor dolce desio / d'esser tu l'amor mio? / Credilo pur: e se timor t'assale, / dubitar non ti vale» (*Don't you think, my heart's sweet desire, that you are my love? Do think so, and doubting is not worth it whenever you are scared*). The duke therefore did not allow the girl to be sent to Florence, moved by his interest in her but also by his ambition to outdo the Florentines: letting Caterina become Caccini's pupil would in fact mean losing her talent forever as soon as she was discovered by the Medici court.

So in 1603, the young girl was sent to Mantua where she was received, as ordered by the duke, «in the house of Claudio Monteverdi our Maestro di Capella who has a wife and other relatives and where she will stay, it can be said, under our eyes». It is interesting to note how the ruling

class of the time was directly involved and participated in all matters concerning the arts at court; this shows how fundamental and central these were, something that today seems almost impossible to imagine.

In the Monteverdi household, Caterina also studied with the composer's wife, Claudia Cattaneo, who was a soprano herself at the court of Mantua, and with her she learned everything she needed to know about her role at court. The young woman was thus always under Monteverdi's guidance; he composed pieces inspired by her and then sung by her. Once she had completed her studies, she moved to the palace and according to a letter written shortly after her arrival, we know that: «Of all those works that Caterina sings, Your Highness is most pleased with those by Sig.r Giuseppe Cenci», also called Giuseppino del Biado. One of the composer's surviving pieces is a popular song from the 16th century entitled *Fuggi fuggi da questo cielo* (Run, Run away from this sky) but more commonly known as the *Mantovana* or *Mantua dance*. Its melody quickly spread throughout Renaissance Europe, giving rise to numerous arrangements and variations. Running and dancing its way across Europe, *Il ballo di Mantova* returns this evening not far from home, presented in variations composed by viola da gamba player Giovanna Baviera. The piece is an invitation to escape the «harsh, hard and merciless frost» of winter and welcome the «graceful and vague Spring [that] presages of Love».

In contrast, the spring described by Boccaccio in Monteverdi's madrigal *Io mi son giovinetta* is different: the «giovinetta [who laughs and sings] alla stagion novella» warns the lover to flee from her ardour because 'in questi rai Primavera per [lui] non sarà mai' [in these rays springtime for [him] will never be]. No one fled, indeed: in 1606, when our *giovinetta*, maiden, was 16, Duke Vincenzo gave her a house opposite the palace as a sign of gratitude for her talent and daily service at court. Two years later, during carnival, Caterina seemed to surprise everyone by participating in the role of Venus in Marco da Gagliano's *Dafne*, who wrote in the preface to the published score how the singer's performance had been so exceptional that it filled the entire theatre with joy and amazement.

After the success of *Dafne*, Caterina began studying for the role of Arianna in Monteverdi's opera, the performance of which was planned for May, on the occasion of the wedding of Prince Francesco Gonzaga and Margherita di Savoia. Two weeks after the carnival, the music for Arianna was almost complete, but its thread seemed to come to a halt: «Arianna is ill, for the Romana is not sure to live, indeed she is in no small danger».

On 8 March 1608, Caterina Martinelli, only 18 years old died of smallpox: one could unfortunately say «such powerful flames and darts in a weak heart». In a letter to the duke of Mantua, who was in Turin, Eleonora Gonzaga wrote: «these doctors say that the cause of her death was partly the bad season, in which there is an influx of varolae that kills many, but much more her death was caused by the fact that the poor girl wanted to drink strong wines and particularly claret [...] so that her blood was so inflamed that it was not able to remedy the great fury of the disease that had occurred». Perhaps not an accurate diagnosis; the spicy notes of those wines (from Monferrato?) can however be clearly heard in: «Damsel all fair,/ pour, pour that beautiful wine / let the dew fall / ruby distilled».

In 1610, Duke Vincenzo, wishing to make Caterina's memory eternal, had a marble tomb erected in her honour and commissioned Monteverdi to compose a lyrical sestina, written by Scipione Agnelli for the death of «Signora Romanina». The theme of the Sestina, *Lacrime d'amante al sepolcro dell'amata* would be the lament of the shepherd Glauco for the death of his nymph Corinna, characters in whom Duke Vincenzo and Caterina can easily be identified. However, it represented also Monteverdi's last fond embrace to his wife, who had died the year before. The sestina is a poetic composition consisting of six verses of six endecasyllables each. The lines never rhyme with each other within the verse, but the final word of each line rhymes with itself in the following verse. The rhyme words are thus arranged in the text according to a complex pattern called *retrogradatio cruciata*. Finally, an envoy of three endecasyllables is added in which the

rhyme-words appear gathered together (in this poem the words are: *pianto, seno, cielo, Glauco, tomba e terra*). Monteverdi's intonation gives this complex and somewhat courtly poetic form a special expressive depth, characterising each verse with different musical devices.

Although the thread of our Arianna, or rather Caterina, was all too soon severed by the Fates, it nevertheless remains the link between two of the most moving cycles of the *Sesto Libro di Madrigali*: the *Lamento d'Arianna* and the *Sestina*. It is only thanks to Monteverdi that today we can tell this precious story, which otherwise would have been forever forgotten, leaving behind nothing but a few dusty archive documents would remain. Monteverdi made Caterina Martinelli immortal, composing in her memory and deeply engraving her memory in ours. The tomb commissioned by Duke Vincenzo was razed to the ground in 1773 together with the church of S. Maria del Carmine in Mantua where it stood, but 'Caterinuccia' is brought back to our memory this evening thanks to *Lamento d'Arianna*, **where everything was born and everything is reborn.**

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