



Selva morale e spirituale

«[works] that show mankind the straight roadway of happiness»
(Orazio Lombardelli, *Ragguaglio de gli scrittori spirituali*, Florence 1592)

Anno Domini 1641. Catholic Europe and Protestant Europe have been having it out on the battlefields of the Thirty Years' War for more than two decades. In such a moment of crisis for the religious consciences of the Old Continent, the elderly Claudio Monteverdi, already maestro di cappella at San Marco since 1613, published a sylloge of sacred and spiritual music, a compendium of the years he spent in the service of the Serenissima. In the dedication, he pays homage to the widow empress Eleonora Gonzaga, daughter of the fondly remembered Vincenzo I, who employed Monteverdi during his period in Mantua.

The title is programmatic. Orazio Vecchi, in *Selva di varia ricreazione* (1590), gives us a definition of 'forest': the listener must not follow «a continuous thread», but must wander through the music as in a forest among the «arbori». The 'trees' this evening are 'moral' and 'spiritual': the former with edifying content and in Italian (madrigals, canzonettas), the latter linked to para-liturgical and liturgical occasions (hymns, psalms, intonations of individual parts of the *Ordinarium Missae*); on the one hand, the fleeting nature of an earthly existence too brief to place hope in vain mortal things, and on the other, the eternity of the revived post-Tridentine Catholicism.

Among the authors of moral compositions, besides Petrarch, is the poet of spiritual lyrics Angelo Grillo (1557-1629), whose madrigals were included in the *Divin* Claudio's *Terzo Libro* (1592). For example, an enthusiastic Grillo wrote to Monteverdi in 1612: «This purple rose of mine [a madrigal] from the bleeding eyes of the extinct Christ, [...], will draw [...] tears of tenderness from the eyes of the listeners, and a thousand blessings from their mouths».

The other interesting presence can be discerned among the spiritual 'fronds' most exposed to God's mild and comforting rays: the *Pianto Della Madonna*, the famous *contrafactum* (a pre-existing melody to which a new text is superimposed) of *Il Lamento di Arianna*, placed at the end of the entire collection. But before reaching the top of the forest we encounter other Marian 'branches': two intonations of the *Magnificat* and no less than three of the antiphon *Salve Regina*. The inclusion of compositions dedicated to the Virgin Mary seems to have been required by the people who organised collections of spiritual poems, above all Pietro Petracchi, who in the *Muse sacre* of 1608 wrote: «[subjects are] the life and death of the Saviour, or about the martyrdom of some saint, and especially about the excellencies and sorrows of the Blessed Virgin».

The Canzonetta for 3 voices with two violins, *Chi vol che m'innamori*, is the last *arbor* on a moralising text; the author is Angelo Grillo. The three stanzas are each sung to the same music and anticipated by the same short instrumental refrain entrusted to the two violins and basso continuo on a dance rhythm. The writing of the voices is predominantly homophonic and chordal;

dialoguing, however, at the panting «Death, oh alas», when the instrumental bass symbolically heads into the dark depths of the lower register. This atmosphere of resignation is followed by the soothing *emistichio* «Hoggi si ride» (today we laugh) over a buoyant dance rhythm; counterbalancing this is the *gravitas* of the second *emistichio* «e poi diman si piange» (and then tomorrow we weep). The whole song is closed by the same initial instrumental refrain, this time more extended.

As soon as we enter the forest, however, we encounter the laurel tree *O ciechi, il tanto affaticar che giova?* (to what avail such toiling?), a moral madrigal for five voices with two violins. The text is taken from a series of tercets from Petrarch's *Triumphus Mortis*, which reiterate the theme of *vanitas*: what is the use of toiling to subjugate foreign peoples, coveting riches and honours, if «tornate a la gran madre antica, e l'vostro nome a pena si ritrova»? (on returning to the Great Mother, your name is barely remembered?) The voices proceed alternating between homorhythmic and imitative sections, leaving room for individual voice interventions; moreover, moments of warlike impetus are alternated with moments of suavity, as when all the voices pronounce «vie più dolce».

In the middle of the path we find ephemeral wildflowers such as *È questa vita un lampo*, madrigal for five voices on a text by Grillo. The fleetingness of earthly things is expressed by a predominantly imitative writing that alternates with short homophonic sections, such as those on «past», «future» and «present».

Let us now turn our gaze towards the thick foliage of the 'arbours', among which we glimpse the flowers of the vespertine psalm *Confitebor Terzo alla francese*. The question seems obvious: what is French about this psalm? The wording 'alla francese' had already appeared in the *Scherzi musicali* (1607) and in two amorous madrigals from the *Ottavo libro* (1638). Probably Monteverdi's imitation of the French style lies in the alternation of solo (or duo) and full-voice sections; for some, however, it lies in the adoption of Jean Antoine de Baïf's *musique mesurée à l'antique*, in which musical rhythm coincides with text prosody. After the soprano's ornato *Gloria Patri*, the *sicut erat* is sung as the beginning of the psalm.

We find carved into the bark of a tree the words *Iste confessor*, a vespertine hymn for solo voice with two violins. The music intones the text in a strophic manner; ample space is left to the instruments, which not only open and close the hymn, but also engage in a concerted dialogue with the voice.

Bathed in divine light, here is a pomegranate tree offering us its fruit; before tasting it, let us cut off a flower: *Nigra sum*, motet for solo voice taken from the *Vespro della Beata Vergine*. The tenor's melody seems to express the text's meaning to the utmost degree: Monteverdi exploits the imperative «Surge» to draw an ascending motion with the song; the imploring «veni»; all elements, these, of musical mimesis. The first fruit is the already mentioned *Pianto della Madonna* on a Latin text, which we have already said is a *contrafactum* of *Lamento di Arianna*. The topos of abandonment is shifted from the amorous to the religious sphere, even if we are still talking about love (that between mother and child); on the other hand, the Madonna suffers pain like Ariadne when she pronounces that sorrowful «Iam moriar». The second pomegranate is the *Salve Regina for two tenor voices or two sopranos*. The two voices begin by greeting Our Lady one at a time; together they appeal to her («Ad te clamamus») in a loud voice; together they imitate the sigh («suspiramus»); they converse producing a climax over «o dulcis virgo».

At the exit of the forest, a small tree and a majestic sequoia. *The psalm Laudate Dominum omnes gentes* (published posthumously in 1651 in a collection by Gasparo Casati) sees the bass voice juggling virtuosity and lyrical sections, not excluding the instrumental bass in its cantilena. In the well-known *Beatus vir primo*, the six voices and two violins converse in different groups over an ostinato bass of about four notes that rarely transgresses its *continuum*.

Here then is the way to happiness: praise the Lord, for blessed is the man who finds joy in his teachings.

A few hints, now, at the instrumental sonatas interspersed among the vocal pieces. To reiterate how fleeting life is, Dario Castello (1602-1631), a violinist and cornettist at St Mark's, is the author of two books of sonatas in the modern style, where modern means the effect created by the juxtaposition of contrasting sections in terms of rhythm and character. By Giovanni Battista Fontana (Brescia, 1589; Padua, 1630) we possess a posthumous collection (1641) of various sonatas for violins and basso continuo. In Fontana's case, some of the numerous sections that make up the sonatas are repeated by making diminutions, and ornamentations.

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